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Fireside Chat with [Jon Finer](#)

[Jon Finer](#), Principal Deputy National Security Advisor, National Security Council

[Nick Schiffrin](#), Foreign Affairs and Defense Correspondent, PBS NewsHour

Nick Schiffrin ([01:10](#)):

Thank you. Thank you so much and thank you all for being here. And thank you all of you who are watching online. And John, thank you. It's always a pleasure to talk to you. Let's just jump into Israel and Gaza. One of the main storylines right now is a timeframe or a possible timeframe has the US, given Israel a deadline to wrap up major combat operations and is that deadline in the next few weeks?

Jon Finer ([01:35](#)):

Thanks, first of all, it's great to be here and great to be here with you, Nick. Look, it won't surprise you, I don't think to hear me say that we are not in the business of being that prescriptive with a core partner and ally who has suffered such an egregious, appalling terrorist attack and who is responding in our view with what is absolutely necessary and their responsibility to reduce the threat to their own civilian population. So no, we have not given a firm deadline to Israel, not really our role. This is their conflict. That said, we do have influence even if we don't have ultimate control over what happens on the ground in Gaza. And we are trying to use our influence to steer that conflict in the most constructive, in our view, way possible. And that means that it's conducted consistently with the dictates of international law, proportionality discrimination between civilian targets, which should not be hit and legitimate military targets. But in terms of telling them, you must stop at this moment. That's not the way we conduct our

Nick Schiffrin ([02:34](#)):

Business. And so there's a lot to get into even in what you just said. But just to stay on this idea of major combat operations, what does the US want to see in what Israel calls phase three of their military campaign after the most intense fighting? What does that look like in the US mind ideally?

Jon Finer ([02:51](#)):

So look, in terms of objectives, I think there are many that have been put out, many sort of very muscular verbs that are used occasionally by Israeli officials. But the two I think that we're most focused on is one, they have said that Hamas can no longer govern, can no longer be in charge of Gaza. We think that is a very legitimate objective given what has happened on October 7th and since. And the second is that Hamas can no longer be allowed to pose the type of threat that it posed to Israel on October 7th. And that frankly, if the war were to stop today, it would continue to pose, which is why we are not in a place yet of asking Israel to stop or for ceasefire. Those two objectives we think are legitimate. We think

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they're working in in that direction, but they have not achieved them yet.

Nick Schiffrin ([03:37](#)):

Netanyahu has expanded that even further. I mean, he said Demilitarize, Gaza, deradicalize, Gaza, is that even a military objective that the US believes is possible?

Jon Finer ([03:46](#)):

So he's one of a number of leaders in the region who have made comments along those lines. Again, I think the

Nick Schiffrin ([03:52](#)):

I mean, he's the prime minister of Israel, presumably he's the one who's dictating this war, right?

Jon Finer ([03:56](#)):

In terms of objectives, he's the one who sets the direction for the government of Israel. I think again, the details will matter here. Hamas would certainly need to not have the sort of military capability. It was able to demonstrate on October 7th, one more than 1200 Israeli civilians were brutally massacred. That is not something that any government would allow to continue on its border. So to the extent demilitarization would mean that that is no longer possible. It's a very legitimate objective.

Nick Schiffrin ([04:24](#)):

Let's go to the operational aspects of this, and obviously we're looking at the South right now. Israel is inside Hannis or parts of Hannis where it says Hamas leaders are hiding. And of course the air campaign continues. So you've said that Israel right now is telegraphing its punches when it comes to the fight in the south, and Israel has created kind of an interactive digital map that is designed to kind of say this part of the south is safe or safer is the actual word that they use. And this part is not. But that relies of course on Gaza's understanding the map, having access to the map in terms of telecommunications. So do you really believe right now that Israel's air campaign in the south has not repeated some of the errors that the president himself has identified as Israel's air campaign in the north?

Jon Finer ([05:15](#)):

So I'd say a few things about the south one, and we've been quite clear about this. We believe there are many legitimate military targets that remain in the South, including as Israel has said, perhaps much if not most of the Hamas leadership and that they have every right to go after those targets.

Nick Schiffrin ([05:28](#)):

So the US believes that Hamas leadership is hiding in the South right now

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Jon Finer ([05:32](#)):

We've been told that that is Israel's assessment. We have nothing that contradicts that. I would add though that we have also been clear that Israel should learn the lessons of the North. We have been quite clear both publicly and directly, privately with the Israeli government that there have been aspects of how the conflict was conducted in the North that we think did not show sufficient care for civilian life and that those aspects should be ameliorated in the south especially. And this is important because there are many more people in Southern Gaza than there were at the start of the conflict because Israel directed them to go there. And so we work day in, day out and engage directly day in, day out, including today frankly, between the president and the prime Minister on how the conflict is being conducted in all parts of Gaza, but with a particular focus on the south. Because in many ways there is more responsibility for the people there because they've been directed to go there by the government of Israel.

Nick Schiffrin ([06:25](#)):

And do you believe at this moment Israel has taken heed of those warnings? I mean Palestinians we speak to in southern Gaza say nowhere safe

Jon Finer ([06:33](#)):

Again, I think it's important to understand what the role is of the United States. We have influence, no doubt over how this war is conducted. We do not have a complete control, but I think there is a lot of evidence that our influence actually has had a positive impact on a number of areas. One on day, one of the conflict, the basic stated policy of the government of Israel is humanitarian assistance would not go into Gaza. That is obviously no longer the case. We're now upwards of 200 trucks a day of humanitarian assistance going in, which is not satisfactory to us. We want more than that to go in, but it is a major step forward. Two, it was the government of Israel's position and frankly the government of Egypt's position that foreign passport holders would not be able to get out of Gaza because they did not want to allow what was Hamas' main demand, which is wounded Gaza's to be able to exit first. We got past that hurdle and were able to get hundreds if not thousands of foreign passport holders out of Gaza. Third, the position was no pauses of any kind, and we evolved in the direction of a hostage deal that enabled more than a week of sustained humanitarian pauses, the only sustained respite that the people of Gaza had had throughout this conflict. I don't think any of those developments would've taken place without the direct intervention of the United States.

Nick Schiffrin ([07:46](#)):

There has been evidence, as you say, that Israel's ground operation has been adjusted for sure based on a lot of US advice, including US military advice that got into tactical operational advice. But the air campaign is something that a lot of people are still focused on. The IDF this week actually put out its own estimate for how many Gaza's have been killed. They said 15,000, which actually is pretty close to the Gaza House Ministry, which is controlled by Hamas. They said 5,000 of those were Hamas terrorists,

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which means 10,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed. Is that an acceptable number?

Jon Finer ([08:24](#)):

So I'd say a couple things. One is you pointed to something that is unusual that Israel is doing in the conduct of this war. You called it telegraphing their punches. The way I would describe it, the way we have asked Israel to go about this is to be clearer about where they will be fighting and where they won't be fighting. We think that is very important and one way in which under unimaginably difficult circumstances, people in Gaza who in the best of times are suffering things that many of us in this room, unless we've happened to have been there, would not even be able to contemplate, give them some chance of avoiding what would otherwise be violence and calamity. That's quite important. But it's also quite important that that information is communicated clearly, that it's easily understood, and then that it is consistent with how the conflict is actually conducted once that information is communicated.

([09:16](#)):

Now, there have been instances where people were directed to places where there were ultimately strikes, targets of opportunity, that sort of thing. When that sort of thing happens, we raise it directly with the government of Israel on the numbers. To be honest, one of the things that is maddening to some people but is just a fact of how international law on this topic works, is that the concept of proportionality is not spelled out in terms of an absolute formula. It's not this ratio to that ratio means you're either above the line or below the line. So we are less focused frankly on that calculus, which is a bit inevitable and more ineffectual and more focused on when issues arise that raise our concerns being very direct and very clear with our Israeli counterparts and trying to alter the way the conflict is conducted. And I think we've had some success at that.

Nick Schiffrin ([10:01](#)):

International law does require Israel to prevent hunger. And this week the WFP said a catastrophic hunger crisis threatens to overwhelm the civilian population. And today, Martin Griffiths, the head of the humanitarian agency said, we do not have a humanitarian operation in Southern Gaza that can be called by that name anymore. The obvious question is what pressure are you putting on Israel to increase humanitarian, but specifically, what would the proper humanitarian access be today in Southern Gaza?

Jon Finer ([10:34](#)):

So I'd say a few things about this. One is hearing those quotes, seeing the images is obviously anguishing for all of us who work on this. This is an incredibly hard problem and it is incredibly hard, honest to put yourself in the position of people who are living in the way that residents of Gaza are living right now. And I'm certainly not talking about Hamas and its fighters. I'm talking about the vast majority of Gaza's who frankly have nothing to do with this war but are caught up in it who are innocent, struggling. And so again, I think our strong view is that there should be significantly more humanitarian assistance going into Gaza than is currently the case there. Were on the order of 400 trucks a day going into Gaza before the war, many of those, by the way, were not humanitarian assistance, they were just commercial traffic

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goods that people can buy in markets. We think that is actually quite important to restore if you're going to get back to anything resembling a normal daily life. And we're a long way from that. Again, we're now on the order of a couple hundred trucks a day that is a significant step forward from where we were not nearly good enough and we're going to keep the pressure on.

Nick Schiffrin ([11:42](#)):

Last question about Israel Gaza and then we'll zoom out. An Amnesty International investigation found US weapons killed 43 Gaza civilians, including 19 children in two airstrikes. They found fragments of us made JDA bombs in the rubble. And in both cases, amnesty said there was no warning of an imminent strike. Perhaps this is an obvious question, but do you believe that US weapons are killing Palestinian civilians?

Jon Finer ([12:04](#)):

Look, what I will say is the United States provides extensive security assistance to the government of Israel that security assistance is being used in this conflict, which is part of why we believe we have a particular responsibility in addition to our longstanding very close ties to the government of Israel, to work with them on conducting this war in ways that are consistent with international law, consistent with our values. And by the way that goes beyond Gaza, I think one of the things that has gotten some attention but probably should get more, is the fact that President Biden has put more pressure on the government of Israel with regard to not just Gaza, but settler violence being perpetrated in the West Bank than I think any of his predecessors have

Nick Schiffrin ([12:43](#)):

First visa bans yesterday since the Clinton administration

Jon Finer ([12:46](#)):

From the US government that has ever been placed that I'm aware of on settlers, the visa restrictions that you just described. And for people who have spent time in the West Bank, obviously settler violence is an enormous problem, but that is not the only challenge that people there face. There are freedom of movement restrictions, just other elements of impediment to basic functioning of daily life. And the President has shone a light on this in a way I think that deserves more attention.

Nick Schiffrin ([13:13](#)):

Alright, let's zoom out on Sunday. The Houthis in Yemen launched four attacks on three commercial vessels in the Red Sea. And while the US has not said that its ships were targeted, the USS Kearney considered three separate Houthi drones, enough of a threat to shoot them down. So why haven't you returned fire?

Jon Finer ([13:32](#)):

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So that is not the first time, by the way, that US vessels have shot down a munitions traveling out of Yemen, moving north up the Red Sea in the direction of Israel. Early in the conflict, that same ship the USS Carney shot down dozens of both missiles and drones headed in that direction in what was a remarkable act of defense of Israeli territory. And again, we've put out information about that.

Nick Schiffrin ([13:58](#)):

Wait a minute, but I need to press on that. I'm not sure that's what at least publicly DOD has said so far, the USS Kearney was defending Israel when those strikes were made purposely,

Jon Finer ([14:08](#)):

What we said is those drones were and missiles were moving north up the Red Sea. We don't know the ultimate destination, but based on what the Houthis have said, based on what the Houthis ethos is, we can only imagine what the ultimate target was and likely was not Egypt or Jordan, the other two countries in that vicinity.

Nick Schiffrin ([14:23](#)):

But does that mean the president has authorized air defense on behalf of Israel?

Jon Finer ([14:26](#)):

The president is authorized the ships to shoot down munitions that pass in the vicinity of our destroyers, and that's what the Carney did in both of those cases.

Nick Schiffrin ([14:36](#)):

So go back to after this weekend

Jon Finer ([14:38](#)):

A very Important moment.

Nick Schiffrin ([14:39](#)):

Yeah. So go back to this weekend. Why has there been no military strike on the Houthis who are launch These attacks?

Jon Finer ([14:44](#)):

Let's talk about what we actually are doing in response to the Houthi Strikes one today we've announced a set of sanctions actions against enablers among the IRGC and others of the Houthis military capability out of Yemen. Two, we are bolstering a maritime coalition made up of dozens of countries that will provide naval assets, military assets to help protect those ceilings. The United States stands for freedom of navigation, certainly in these critical waterways in and around the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. But all over the world, this is a sort of a core principle. If we determined, and this is another

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important thing to make clear that there was targeting of US assets, whether those were US civilian assets or US military assets, that would be a much more severe escalation, but we have not made that calculation yet.

Nick Schiffrin ([15:32](#)):

Meaning the Carneys shooting down three drones does not mean that the United States government has decided the Carney was the target.

Jon Finer ([15:39](#)):

We have not made an assessment that we were directly targeted by the Houthis.

Nick Schiffrin ([15:42](#)):

Okay. So if what you are doing is creating this maritime task force is the vision, and it sounds like it's still being negotiated, but is the vision that US ships will escort and defend commercial ships in the Red Sea? Is that where we're going?

Jon Finer ([15:54](#)):

They are there to make those sea lanes safe for commercial traffic? Yes.

Nick Schiffrin ([15:58](#)):

Does that invite or does that risk escalation if Iran were to attack those ships, does that create another target that does not exist today or do you see this as just extending what assets are already there? I dunno how see

Jon Finer ([16:12](#)):

Is a target that doesn't exist today. There have been ships that have been not just shot at, but actually hit by missiles being fired out of Yemen. There have been ships that have been boarded and taken into Houthi territory. So this threat is real and it is there and we and our partners are stepping up to try to do something about it. The escalation is by the Houthis and by their enablers. And one important thing to say about this, because I think we've been somewhat clear about it, but we have more to say the Houthis would not be able to do this without the support of Iran, would not be able to do it, would not have the weaponry, would not have the intelligence, would not have the motivation to do this, were it not for the role of the IRGC. And so we are quite clear that the Houthis are ultimately responsible, but there is significant role for Iran, these attacks.

Nick Schiffrin ([16:56](#)):

Do you believe the IRGC is directing these attacks?

Jon Finer ([16:58](#)):

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We believe that they're involved in the conduct of these attacks, the planning of them, the execution of them, the authorization of them, and that ultimately they support them.

Nick Schiffrin ([17:05](#)):

And then one last one on the targets, the protecting ships does not preclude military action of course. And I talked to a bunch of senior former CENTCOM officials who made this point. They said if you strike the Houthis, actually individual strikes could degrade their ability to launch these attacks on ships and that there is no risk of escalation because it does seem that Iran is not interested in escalating to Israel. So again, I ask why not do both protect ships and respond militarily?

Jon Finer ([17:34](#)):

We have certainly not ruled out the possibility of taking military action. We reserve that right. For now, I've laid out the approach that we are looking at sanctions, a maritime coalition to provide a reassurance and security for commercial sea lanes. And if there is a decision to escalate against us, we will look at other options.

Nick Schiffrin ([17:53](#)):

Two questions on Israel The day after Mahmoud Abbas, I think I did the math right, is on the 18th year of a four year presidential term, the US uses the phrase a revitalized Palestinian authority. Is that a post Abbas presidential authority?

Jon Finer ([18:07](#)):

So not necessarily. I mean I think the important thing about the Palestinian authority right now is, and this is a phrase the president often uses in other contexts, don't compare me to the almighty, compare me to the alternative. There is no other game in town right now in terms of organized institutionalized Palestinian political entity. And I should say a few other things. They are taking a lot of fire sometimes on the hill, sometimes in the government of Israel. But right now they're cooperating very closely with the IDF despite the fact that this is not exactly a popular decision for them to do this. Quite the opposite in the West Bank to maintain security under extremely difficult circumstances where violence against Palestinians in the West Bank is increasing more than 230 Palestinians in the West Bank we believe have been killed since the start of this a new round of conflict.

Nick Schiffrin ([19:00](#)):

That's a US assessment, not just an Israeli assessment, Palestinian assessment.

Jon Finer ([19:04](#)):

And what I'll also say, and this is important, is that they have continued to provide that cooperation even in spite of the fact they're getting criticized up and down. So is the PA perfect? Is the PA not in need of additional legitimacy for the reasons that you just described, the lack of an election. Now in many years

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we absolutely agree with that, which is why we use terms like revamped and revitalized, but they're also going to be an essential part of any Palestinian future.

Nick Schiffrin ([19:30](#)):

But Israel has said essentially no PA, at least as it's constituted today publicly, the Arab government say they have no interest in helping this. Netanyahu has said has all but said the occupation will follow and Israel's made clear publicly that they will establish buffer zones. So how is it that you are trying to convince Israel not to reoccupy?

Jon Finer ([19:49](#)):

Again, as with some of the other issues that we've discussed, I would caution you or anyone else against taking an initial pronouncement that is made about how things will or won't be as the definitive final statement or else we would not be getting any humanitarian assistance in Gaza, any foreign passport holders out or any pauses related to the negotiation of a hostage deal

Nick Schiffrin ([20:08](#)):

You're saying even Netanyahu's line about the PA you believe may not necessarily be the case in two weeks or two months Or whatever way

Jon Finer ([20:14](#)):

I understand that that line was stated in the way I understand their position is the PA as exactly as currently constituted.

Nick Schiffrin ([20:21](#)):

And does that also apply to Arab government's public statements about,

Jon Finer ([20:24](#)):

Look, I'm not going to speak for what any Arab government does or doesn't believe about the Palestinian authority. I just would ask anyone what is the alternative in the current moment? And right now we think the PA is going to have to play an important role not just in the West Bank but ultimately in Gaza as well.

Nick Schiffrin ([20:40](#)):

So I've got 10 more minutes, we're going to do Ukraine and one on Venezuela at the end and then I'm going to come to one of our rising leaders here to ask a question. Alright, so funding for Ukraine. Senators are literally on planes right now flying home, there's no deal and they're leaving without much negotiation behind closed doors. The other day, Republican senators actually yelled at the new chairman, the joint chiefs of staff over immigration. So why not be more open to Republican demands

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over the border in order to save funding for Ukraine? That IV itself says is the difference between victory and defeat.

Jon Finer ([21:18](#)):

So I'd say a couple of things because I'm not sure I totally agree with the framing of the question. One is, and the president has been I think quite eloquent about this, it is a shocking moment in Washington when people are casting a vote against what is absolutely necessary in our view strategically and on the battlefield for UK Ukraine to not fall victim to the predations of Vladimir Putin. The Ukrainians themselves, the top advisor to President Zelensky came out yesterday and said a vote in this direction is a vote that makes highly likely that we end up losing this war. Paraphrasing. But basically

Nick Schiffrin ([21:54](#)):

That's That's Andriy Yermak the chief staff.

Jon Finer ([21:56](#)):

Exactly. So that is one element of this vote that should not be lost in the broader political fight about the border, but on the border, I would point to what the president himself said after his remarks about Ukraine yesterday, which is that he's open to negotiating. What he's not open to is being handed an ultimatum by an extreme faction of the other party. He's open to discussing changes in border policy. He has put forward proposals for enhanced resources to help manage the border in our supplemental request. So he has expressed that those conversations, those negotiations should take place. That's our position.

Nick Schiffrin ([22:31](#)):

The Counteroffensive has not met even Ukraine's own goals they set to mock, which is in the south on the road toward Meli Topo, which is on the road to Crimea. They call TOC mock the minimum of what they were going to achieve and they thought they would achieve it in the first few hours and days and they have not gotten there. And at this point, from what I've seen have been there five times in the last year and a half, Ukraine has neither the people nor the equipment to really go on the offensive at this point. And frankly, the weather has gotten to the point where it couldn't move that fast anyway. So do you believe that Ukraine should now shift even temporarily to the defensive?

Jon Finer ([23:08](#)):

So I apologize for being one of these people to interrogate the questions. I know that's not your intention for my answers, but I do think it's important in this context, and this is not you, but we do sometimes when we're asked about the Counteroffensive get the impression that people believe the war began when the counteroffensive began and that therefore the counteroffensive not going as far as

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people wanted, reflects some degree of Ukrainian failure or some degree of Russian success. I think it is very important to put yourself back in the mindset of February of 2022 when many people, including many people in our administration, including some people on the record in our administration, said they believed that Russia would walk over the Ukrainian army in a matter of days. Now here we are almost two years later in a very different place where the big question is not how much of Ukraine's territory Russia will be able to swallow and control, but how much of the territory that Russia got in the early days of this war, Ukraine will be able to get back and they've got more than half of it back during the course of fighting over the course of the last year and a half. And they should get a ton of credit for that. But it comes back actually to the issue you asked me about just a minute ago, which is that Russia has made three bets in the conduct of this war. They bet first that Ukraine would essentially fold that their army would not be able to fight. They were totally wrong about that. That became clear in the early days of the war. They also bet that the United States, the rest of the international community would not come to Ukraine's defense in a meaningful material way. And we did. And that also became clear over the course of the last year and a half. This last bet though is the one that is now most important, which is that even if we did ultimately come to Ukraine's defense, we would not have the staying power to see that through. And that is what Congress is voting on, whether or not Putin gets to win that bet and ultimately win the war or the opposite of that.

Nick Schiffrin ([24:51](#)):

But even if you get 60 billion next week, it's likely that you're not going to get a huge tranche again next year. I ask again, is there an advantage if Ukraine were to go into a defensive crouch for cost reasons or, well, I'll just leave it that. Is there an advantage if Ukraine doesn't when it

Jon Finer ([25:08](#)):

When it comes to what is going to happen or not happen next fall? All I can say about that is a year is a long time. I don't know, I suspect you don't know exactly where things will be on the battlefield or in Washington in that moment, but another year of funding and another year in which Russia would have to suffer on the battlefield is fundamentally a better position than we are in today. Without that funding, I think there's no way to dispute that in terms of offensive warfare. It has been a fact of this conflict that offensive warfare has been very challenging for both sides. Russia has proven a total inability to seize hold territory and then continue to move forward. It has proven difficult for the Ukrainians as well. I mean on some level these are two Soviet style armies teeing off on each other. But the problem we have, and the reason again it comes back to resources is if there are two armies that fight more or less the same way, although we are trying to train the Ukrainians and having some success at training them to fight differently and one is bigger and better resourced than the other, which is where Ukraine would be left again, absent these resources, it will be a huge advantage for the bigger army.

Nick Schiffrin ([26:12](#)):

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And in that war of attrition, Russia has increased production of tanks, increased production of artillery, and the US is struggling to meet us. And Europe, I should say, is struggling to meet its own goals, right?

Jon Finer ([26:25](#)):

This is why again, this money during the course of 2024 is so important because it will keep Ukraine in the fight, keep a degree of parity when it comes to things like munitions, when it comes to air defenses that protect Ukrainian cities and Ukrainian critical infrastructure. Because Russia's other technique, as you well know, is to try to terrorize the Ukrainian population so that they will be demoralized and support for the war will fall apart even inside Ukraine because after 2024, we are ramping up our production, our defense industrial base. We are working with the Ukrainians, including in a conference taking place this week in Washington on ramping up their defense industrial base. The European allies of the United States are doing the same thing and we'll be in a much stronger footing a year, year and a half from now than we are today.

Nick Schiffrin ([27:08](#)):

Even if Ukraine seizes back all of its territory. The fact is that Russia's losing a portion of occupied territory is not going to convince Vladimir Putin to suddenly give up on his desire, his notion of which direction Kyiv should point. Do you believe to the point of your reference to the arms production conference here in Washington this week, do you believe that actually long-range strikes are what the Ukrainians should prioritize when it comes to breaking the long-term Russian will to fight?

Jon Finer ([27:38](#)):

So we and others are providing Ukrainians with long range strikes.

Nick Schiffrin ([27:42](#)):

I meant to say long range into Russia.

Jon Finer ([27:44](#)):

So we have a policy, and we've been very clear about this, we do not support enable Ukrainian strikes into Russia. We also don't think that that is essential for them to succeed on the battlefield. And we think they have had enormous success on the battlefield even absent that. But again, I think the place we would like to put the Ukrainians at the end of next year is where Russia is confronted with a decision. Either they have to come to the negotiating table on terms that would be acceptable to Ukraine based on the UN Charters dictates of sovereignty and territorial integrity for Ukraine, all of Ukraine's territory. Or they will face a stronger Ukraine backed by a stronger defense industrial base in the United States, in Europe and in Ukraine that has more ability to go on the offense yet again. That is a very hard strategic choice. I don't know where the Russians would ultimately come down, but that's where the question we would like to have put to them.

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Nick Schiffrin ([28:34](#)):

I've got one question on Venezuela and then I'll turn it quickly open. Last night, secretary Blinken called Guyana's president after Venezuelans have elected, or sorry, have voted to annex part of Guyana. What message, what warning perhaps do you have for Nicholas Maduro as Venezuela considers what to do following up on that referendum?

Jon Finer ([28:55](#)):

So we've been very clear about this and I'll try to be as clear as I can. And Secretary Blinken spoke with President Ali of Guyana last night and we've put out statements since then. We do not consider this territory to be anything other than legitimately under Guyanese sovereignty. And that has been the case since an arbitral decision that goes back to 1899, which we've obviously dug into in the recent context. But even more recently than that, there's a decision by the International Court of Justice just last week that says that any unilateral, any military, any action that amounts to use of force to try to change these borders would be illegitimate, should not be undertaken. That is very much our position. The Security Council, UN Security Council is going to be taking up this issue as soon as tomorrow. So we have real concerns about the referendum, the rhetoric that we have heard and our message is very clear that would be illegitimate and should not happen.

Nick Schiffrin ([29:52](#)):

And the warning to Maduro of what would happen if he,

Jon Finer ([29:55](#)):

I mean, again, I'm not going to personalize this, I'm not going to hand you the easy headline, but we are very clear about it would be an illegitimate act should not happen and these continued threats that the Venezuelan government keeps making should stop.

Nick Schiffrin ([30:13](#)):

Great. Alright. We've got a fabulous table of rising leaders. We don't have much time, so we'll do one question from this table. I'm hoping well, we've got one right in the front row, microphone there. Thank you so much.

Question 1 ([30:24](#)):

Thank you very much Nick and Mr. Finer, thank you very much. My name is Jonathan Jeffrey, I'm a rising leader. I'm curious about Saudi Arabia. Obviously the horrific October 7th attack came amid a period or potential normalization between Israel and Saudi. What conditions do you think we need to see, see a return to that process and what role do you think the US can and should be playing to help that?

Jon Finer ([30:50](#)):

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

So thanks for the question. We've been quite clear that we think normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would be in the interest of both countries. Genuinely positive, generally positive for the region on the theory that greater integration and normalization of relations is fundamentally a good thing. So we support this process, have supported this process. Ultimately it will be up to the two parties whether they want to get back into the throes of a more intensive negotiation. There's a lot going on in the region right now and the Israeli government obviously has more than its share of issues on its plate. But we ultimately think that that is both possible and remains in the interest of the two countries and the region. We are there to help to provide support. But one other thing I think is quite important about this, it's not gotten a lot of attention, but it is a difference between how we have handled this administration has handled these questions of normalization and how our predecessors did. Our predecessors did the Abraham Accords. We have been supportive of the Abraham Accords and looked for ways to extend and strengthen them, but they did not contain anything that amounted to a step forward for Palestinians. We think that is an important part of Israeli Saudi normalization. We believe the Saudis would support that too. And I think especially in the current context, in light of the conflict that's broken out, that will have to be a piece of the puzzle going forward.

Nick Schiffrin ([32:12](#)):

Jon Finer, deputy National Security Advisor. Thank you very much sir.