

Fireside Chat with Special Envoy Adam Bohler

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Speakers

- Adam Bohler, Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Response, U.S. Department of State
 - Moderator: Kaitlan Collins, CNN
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Collins

Thank you so much, and we're excited, glad to have you guys all back here after lunch. Um, I think one of the things that people are most curious about with your job, which, before I covered the White House, I didn't even know that that was really an entire role on its own, or that one person was dedicated to that. And obviously we've seen with so many high profile cases over not just the last you know what has happened since Trump has returned to office, but over the last eight years, all these high profile cases of people who are hostages or wrongfully detained. Can you just walk us through what your day to day is like? What is your job like when you wake up the morning and throughout the day?

Boehler

Interesting question, I think in my job, you have to thrive on the unpredictable. And so for me, that could range from we'll have kind of our planned day, but that will range from the current situation, like, let's say today, right? You have some movement forward that I think President and Steve some movement forward on the Gaza side, right? So there's some back and forth there and discussion, because one, the President's made it clear that we want to get all, not only Americans, but all hostages home there. We still have two Americans left there. And so there'll be that variety. Then there'll be something that's happening with a Latin American country where we have some people that we want to think about it, then we'll be planning, okay, how can we? The president has really asked us to think, how you really redefine bringing Americans home and making it the default, not even something that you so we're working on different solutions there. So I would say there's a variety of different interactions. I spoke with the President of a country this morning. So it's a variety, back and forth. And then you have things like this, which is really important in terms of getting our message out on what the administration is doing, and then how we get the rest of the hostages. So it's a variety well.

Collins

And with Gaza, I mean, we were going to get there, but we'll just continue there. Since you brought that up, I mean, you have spoken directly with Hamas at times, and in this negotiation period, as they've tried hard to get Americans home, Israelis who are being held, other citizens that are still being held in Gaza or have been killed and their bodies are still being held, which I've spoken to a lot of these families, they still want their loved ones to come home that means just the same to them. What is that like? How do you approach? Does anything prepare you for speaking to members of Hamas? What is that like for you?

Boehler

For me, I keep my thought on my job and what I'm supposed to do, which is, and really we think about it, is bring people home and make sure they're never taken again. And so the way that I best do that is try to think through, what do they want, what do we want, and where are there some commonalities, where it ends up resulting in Americans, or in this case, Israelis, coming home, so like in a job, I try to keep it unemotional. From that perspective, probably, as a person, I deal with emotion at a different time, yeah. But when I'm on the job, I'm focused on my objectives.

Collins

Yeah, but on that specifically. I mean, there have been so many moments where it seemed like Hamas and Israel were close to a cease fire or close to an agreement. And you are speaking with these families, I presume, who are hoping their loved ones have come home. How do you balance, you know, not giving them false hope, but also making them still have hope that they will get their loved ones. And we've seen these remarkable cases where people have come home.

Boehler

So, one of the my predecessors, Roger, who's a friend. He's a great guy. My predecessor before, by the way, Robert O'Brien, who hired Roger, who was the National Security Advisor in Trump one. I asked him for advice before starting the role. Honestly, one of my points of advice is, if you get very upset, how do you react in front of the families? Yeah, what do you tell families? And their best advice is just be authentic and be truthful. And so if at that moment you're feeling something, you can let that show. And I do my best, from a family perspective, to be extremely responsive. And so my view is, if someone says to me now, well, are my loved ones going to be released in the very near term? I'll tell you, I am more optimistic than I have been in a while about that, but I'm also going to be honest and authentic about what the barriers are. And so what I

found is those families have been through way more than I've been through. I don't need to soft pedal to them. What I owe them is responsiveness and authenticity.

Collins

So you find that they prefer when you're just straightforward with them and not optimistic, I guess, at times or how you view the situation.

Boehler

Yeah, their children, family members have been taken away, have been killed. They don't need bullshit from me. They need somebody that's going to be honest to them, with them, and they can certainly take that.

Collins

Where do things stand right now when it comes to Gaza and how close do you think we are? I mean, obviously the Prime Minister of Israel was just in Washington last week. He was there for several days meeting with the President, top officials, Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, as well. He was himself a little, I think, you know, hesitant to say it's close, because there's been those moments where it's gotten closer. Where do you think that stands today?

Boehler

I think there's two forces that come together, and I'll tell you why I think it's possible. One is you have political reality on the ground in Israel, and in that way, there's never been a better time because of Bibi's enormous success, and our success in supporting him in Iran gives enormous strength to him, domestically. And what I found, I find this, certainly in Israel, some of their best leaders, but also in the United States, some of our best leaders, and I'm referring to the person I work for in the president, strength is the best time to do something. So from that side, it makes me optimistic. The other side, Hamas, you asked spending time with them, and there are bad guys that are, because I talk to bad guys, right, it's my job. They're all... You generally don't see me on a negotiation site if you're like a really good guy.

Collins

Someone nice isn't taking Americans hostage. Got it.

Boehler

Yeah, so like, I deal with bad guys, right? So it's like, you know, and so, so some bad guys, they negotiate and they act in different ways. Hamas in particular, is very hard headed, very hard headed. And I think that's what's very frustrating for people negotiating with them, is there are things based on what I know they want, that they

should lean forward and do. And I'll give you a specific example, with Edan Alexander Hamas had multiple times where they probably lost leverage over time and time right. Look at the whole war. They continue to hold out. Israel continues to kick their ass, and yet they still think they have leverage, and so they are very hard headed. I do think Israel is leaning in a lot, because I do think Bibi has the opportunity. I mean, I'd already call him a legend in terms of redrawing the map in the Middle East, sweeping phenomenal I think he has the opportunity to be that squared. And when they look at requirements and redrawing maps. Now that's a big lean in from Israel. And so what I will say is it's closer than it's been. And if it doesn't happen now, in my strong opinion, it would be continued hard headedness from Hamas, in which case Israel will continue to take action as they should.

Collins

Is there a part where, as the time goes on and there is more time for more things to happen in the following the strikes by Israel and Iran and then the United States, but then there's moments, you know, right before we came out here, the Prime Minister's office was putting out a statement because they had a holy site in Gaza, and how they're dealing with that, and the public sentiment in places like Europe, where it is not the same as it is in terms of the longer the war goes on, the more that they do lose public sentiment in some places.

Boehler

I think that if you follow public sentiment, if you're a country like Israel, and world sentiment, that's a very dangerous thing to do, because they're fighting for their survival all the time. And to me, again, it's not a fight between Palestinian-Israel. It's a fight between a terrorist group that's pushing and so in my opinion, they need to do what they need to do. And that's also been the American view, which is they need to do that. Now that doesn't mean in the scope of war like that, especially when you have people like Hamas that are embedded in places, that mistakes don't happen. And I will give Israel credit, which is when mistakes happen, they say them. I saw today, and I saw the statement. It didn't deny it. It said they're looking into it's an issue, you know. So I think Israel can, should count on itself to say, "Hey, this, this can happen." I'm sure it was not on purpose. And I think usually they and then they will do an investigation and say, this is a real issue.

Collins

So Hamas is hard headed. You've also gone to Kabul and met with the Taliban. I mean, when you took this job, what were you expecting going into moments? There's no science. There's nothing to prepare you for something like that. Really, maybe you can talk to Roger Carstens or people who've held your job before. How do you prepare for a meeting like that?

Boehler

So in that particular case, or sometimes before I ran in the first administration, we have a \$60 billion bank called DFC. It was called OPEC, so I was the first CEO of it, and I ran that bank. And the purpose of that bank is to draw, drive development in countries, but it's also to advance our foreign policy. And so if you think about that bank's role, think of me as the positive side of incentives with maybe the negative side, if you're talking to bad guys, being our military or other things. In that role, I was often with folks on the, our military or intelligence, and talking to some of these people. So in the Taliban example, I was working with Ambassador Khalilzad at the time on a tri-party peace agreement and what that would look like. And so in that case, and me doing that, my portion of that was, hey, we have a \$60 billion lithium mine we could build in Afghanistan, but we can't because of security issues, which, by the way, is you. And if you were to enter into something that could be a potential in a tri-party agreement. So I say all this, which is those same Taliban, those are the same people. We just got older. So those are the same people. When we were working on the Abraham Accords, it was still Sheik Mohammed. He was a little more junior, but he was still, you know what he was, it was still MBS. It was still so in some ways, what's interesting, and I feel like this is administration wide in some ways, which is it's obviously so unusual or almost never, unless one considers FDR's term to have an administration that learned that was able to do foreign policy and make relationships, then have a gap, and then have those relationships, because they haven't changed much. So it's kind of an interesting setup from that perspective. So one I do listen and I talk to Roger, I do talk to Robert, et cetera, but a lot of the people that I work with now are the same people.

Collins

And what's fascinating about that, though, is on their side, it is total continuity. I mean, those people have been there nonstop. I wonder how you think that changes the the approach of they're coming to the table with you, knowing this is an administration that's here for this period isn't going to go on any longer because of the term limits, and you're approaching with them, and they've been there since you were there eight years ago.

Boehler

Yeah, it's unusual. And look, this is the constant press I always think of the United States system, which are maybe some of our negative is usually the max of eight years. In this case, it'll go on longer, in a way, right? Because you'd have relationships that start out there and could end up even longitudinal. But we don't have the view that some would like. I'm thinking of our ex ambassadors to Kuwait, who had been there through like, four administrations, and it's so interesting, by the way, to hear their view of how things change, because they're consistent now at the same time, and our system, we

refresh, and we don't, you know. So I, you know, it's the push and pull on some of those things, but it is interesting. I would say, I know, from a foreign policy perspective, I find it very helpful, because otherwise, I think about, let's say Jared, as he was leaning in on the Abraham Accords before so much of Jared success in Abraham Accords was because he put in years of relationship, and it wasn't clear it was going to pan out before the opportunity to strike the Accords happened. It wasn't clear always, and I think in countries in the Middle East, oftentimes we appear transactional, but they're relationship driven countries. People raise capital here. If you know that, it's important that you build a relationship, and that can be hard. So I think that's what's particularly different about President Trump's term now, and I think it will make him ultimately very successful because of that and some of the people around it.

Collins

Do you think we'll see, just speaking of the Abraham Accords, we'll see that grow in the next six months or a year?

Boehler

I do. I think the Saudis were clear at the end of our administration. I think the Saudis were clear in the Biden administration. I think Yeah. And so here's what I would say on all of these things. I think that the inherent reasons there was interest there haven't changed. And sometimes people say to me, "Oh, you know," especially post October 7, right away, they'd say, "Well, what about the Abraham Accords? Because you help work on them. Do you feel that they've degraded, or do you feel like it wasn't worth it or you lost it?" Actually feel exactly the opposite. I think the accords that we drove in President Trump's administration first time the they've held strong. And so people make comments publicly, but if you look at the support, it was a totally different Middle East than if we had been in a war years before. And so I feel optimistic. And I know, as I said, people like Steve Witkoff, Marco [Rubio], and the President are very focused on that when it comes to just finishing on negotiating with bad guys or bad women.

Collins

If you're doing this with Hamas, with the Taliban, some people may say, where do you draw the line in terms of the actual negotiations with them, and what that looks like, in terms of sitting at the table with them and giving them that credibility, and also not encouraging them to take more hostages and get that face to face interaction with someone from The White House.

Boehler

So here I'm going to, I'll use, actually again, my boss's example, in President Trump, which is meeting with somebody doesn't mean giving anything, right? I think meeting

with somebody is two things. One, it's at least some level of understanding of what they want, which can be very difficult to understand if there's no direct interaction. And by the way, what can happen is people can just rely on other people's views. Sometimes those views could be 20 years ago, and they just keep repeating the same so I think having direct interaction is important. The second thing that I think is important is it can cut down on cycle time, because otherwise, in indirect negotiations, this one says this one, and it's literally a game of telephone, like we were kids. So I think one, that's what dialog happens. I would say there's two important things. Though, meeting with people doesn't mean you agree to a deal with them. Quite frankly, I probably think it means you can be harder at knowing what they want. And then the second thing that I think people fear, and one would always need to know, is you wouldn't meet with somebody and then think, Oh, we met. Therefore, you know, human reaction, because people, like people, would think, Oh, maybe they're not pushing this, or maybe they are. But the reality is, you're prepped before. I'm under no illusions ever; these are bad people. They're bad guys. And so, you know, they're bad guys. And so my... I'm not making a moral evaluation. I don't want to go get beers with the guys. What I want is I want Americans out. I don't want to go get beers with the guys. What I want is I want Americans out now, and I want them never to take them again.

Collins

When you sit down with them face to face, how do you start that conversation? How's your week going? Where are you summering like? What do you say to them?

Boehler

Mostly honestly, very quickly I would want to know what they want, like, and I don't just mean like in the immediate but one of the things would be, what are you aiming for? Like, where do you want to get to? Because if I know where they want to get to, then I can say, "Okay, that's what they want. What do I want?" And then is there any commonality in terms of what we want or not, by the way, because I'll tell you, I could sit down. Let's... I'll give an example. I'm not going to say who said this to me. This was in the...

Collins

Come on. No one is recording this.

Boehler

In the first administration, I met with a Senator and he said, "You can bribe the Taliban, but you've got to kill the ISIS."

Collins

Who's accent is that? John Kennedy?

Boehler

The great news is that I'm really bad at accents so it's impossible. I literally just like, it was brought you know, you cannot get it because I'm so bad at it.

Collins

I don't know, I'm trying to think. It sounded a little southern.

Boehler

But the senator's point actually was a good one, which is, in some ways, why do you say because fundamentally, at the end of the day, I'm not sure that the Taliban wants America destroyed. Actually, I don't care that much. They wanted Afghanistan. ISIS, there's probably no group, and there's just nothing. Now, there are things you can do, and that's why he said it, "Kill the ISIS." And sometimes that's the answer. I mean, honestly, probably more than half the times that can be the answer of bad guys. But if it doesn't have to be that answer. You can try to learn and see if there's a route one way or the other.

Collins

When you went into this job, did you have any assumptions about what it would be like? Has that changed now that you've been in the role for a few months?

Boehler

You never know how well you're going to do. And what I hoped, what I hope, was that a president that is focused on action would result in more Americans coming home. I hope this. And ultimately, if you think about what I do, I'm a bit of a really, I'm like a sales guy. I have a product, I sell, I have an outcome, and I sell a product, and what I'm happy about is the 61 number, right? And again, it's not because I'm so awesome, it's because I have a president team that backs it up. And so sometimes people will say, when I'm negotiating, there was one with some bad guys, and I sent a tweet to Secretary Rubio, and I sent it, and it was an aggressive tweet while I'm negotiating with them, and Marco [Rubio] is like, "Are you sure? Like you're right there and that." But in my view on that, "No, no. That gives me it's the opposite way." It gives me strength when we decided to make a move and the President decided to move on Iran for me, getting Americans out, that's going to get Americans out. Because what do I need to say? You don't want to listen to the president, one of his core platforms is getting Americans out. Look what happens. He said something, you know, when we said it on the Mosque site, everybody said, "Oh, when will it happen?" Some people sit on it too. "Oh, you know, he said this." It does not... a week from now, I knew that we would enable Israel, that we would work together, and some of those things would happen. And so it's so important to have that

credibility and that kind of credibility, it doesn't just bring Americans home. It makes people think twice before they take them.

Collins

How do you guys divide up the workload in terms of, you're a special envoy, technically, so is Rick Grenell, so it's T wood, COVID, obviously, is one of the President's top advisors. We've seen each of you have a role in bringing certain Americans home. How do you guys split that up? What does that look like?

Boehler

Yeah. So the way to think about me versus, let's say Steve, for example, Steve has very vertical focus, right? And so if you think about Steve's focus in the Middle East, or what he's been doing Russia, Ukraine, think about vertical. I'm a horizontal. Think of me like a service provider, which is wherever there are Americans or hostages the president deems for me to focus on. I am a service provider. My job is, if Steve is able, in this context, to bring people home himself, or somebody goes to Russia and brings someone home. My team, I have a team of 30 people at State. We'll staff it, we'll provide the plane. We'll expedite it. We'll bring a social worker on board to make sure people are okay. We'll bring them to our facility. We have a facility, a facility in Texas for folks and so but sometimes there isn't somebody doing it. Sometimes it has to be me that goes out. Sometimes it's members of my staff. I'll give you an example. We've gotten a number of Americans out of Belarus. Getting out of Belarus that involves our ambassador in Lithuania, who's great, by the way. It involves my team members. They went out to meet her. They drove over and picked her up. Now, did I need to be the face of that? No. In fact, my job there is making sure it happens. And sometimes I go, sometimes I don't, but I'm very happy. My the way I think of myself is I have a mission. We've got about 5060, more Americans. I will continue to do it until there are none, and maybe in theory, that never happens, because people keep taking it, but I'll keep repeating.

Collins

How many are you working on right now? Would you say? What's your caseload?

Boehler

Every American that's there we think about, I mean really, prioritization is much more around when there has to sometimes be right circumstance for right things, right, if that makes sense? And so let's use Russia as an example. One of the things that I think people did in engaging Russia, which brought Americans home, was to say, "Listen, this is a condition even for a discussion. You need to show the president United States is a huge priority. How can you be holding Americans like this? How can you be holding a

school teacher that's been there so long? Or how can you be holding a ballerina that's a dual citizen because she gave \$30 to Ukraine, and hope to have any productive discussion?" So I think those things are very important to set it and those drive prioritization, because that has to happen, and it's due time. I will say part of my job is to continually drive urgency on it. But so all Americans that are there that fit into this, we will know about, we will track, we will start pushing. And then when it hits, it hits.

Collins

What about deterrence? Because sometimes you see people who are in areas where it's a "do not travel" from the State Department kind of warning, and they're biking, or they're on a trip, or they're just curious 22 year olds. How do you work on that?

Boehler

I mean, you may have seen Secretary Rubio put out don't go to Iran last week. And you'd sort of think that's like, Duh, you know, but you'd be surprised. And so there's a number of forms of deterrence. One, you can inform people. The reality is, most people that go if they're going to go anyway, there's a situation. The other way, again, that you can deter is what things happen because you're an American, if you're going to get \$5 billion because you take some Americans, I guarantee you're going to take some Americans. It's very sensitive to do that, so I think you have to when, as I said, when I said making sure Americans aren't taken again, I'm very, very sensitive to hostage diplomacy because it doesn't work. And so you will see, we very rarely trade people. Very rarely. It has to be very unique. Money? Forget about it. And I would much...

Collins

Why do you think it doesn't work?

Boehler

Because it will incentivize people to take going forward. So then the question is, so I would say, sometimes like my job, sometimes people go ahead.

Collins

No, go ahead.

Boehler

Sometimes people think that my job is just only the positive side of things or that, but again, I won't achieve my second goal. So sometimes they're negative incentives too. So sometimes, if you remember the famous moment when the President showed the Taliban their house in the first administration, that's real. And it's not all about they're bad guys. It's not about good, feel good things all the time.

Collins

And he showed them a picture of their house, saying, basically, we know where you live.

Boehler

Yeah.

Collins

It wasn't subtle.

Boehler

Yeah, it wasn't subtle. But, you know, it's not sometimes you have to show that's what I mean. When we moved in Iran, you can't just be nice. And again, I carry that message, but I do well because of that too. So I think there's always room. And the President has always stated and oriented toward, I would like a diplomatic solution. He told Iran that he told and then Iran tested, and then they saw what they got. So those things are very important, and I think about the same thing from a hostage perspective.

Collins

Yeah. I know a lot of people in the audience are interested in this and have questions about your job. We just have a few moments left, but I'd love to hear from anyone. Go ahead, there's a mic right behind you.

Anniken Huitfeldt

So my name is Anniken. I'm the Norse Ambassador, and thank you so much for doing the dirty job of talking to the bad guys, because not talking to those we disagree with never leads to anything. So I had two questions. The first one is, how strong support do you think Hamas now has among the Palestinians? And the second question is, what did you think when the Taliban took power so quickly after we pulled out?

Boehler

On the first, I sort of liken it a little bit to support of dictators, which is or for example, the support of Kim Jong Un within. There's very little alternative, one or the other. It concerns me a lot, right? They're a terrorist group, and so it's a concerning issue. It's one you hope, if there's ever going to be something lasting that has to go down, but I think they see very little else programming wise. On the issue of Afghanistan, I thought that was a disaster. And I don't say it, I want everybody to know here too for me, I don't say that from a political perspective, because I won't only give negatives, but in that particular case, the issue that you have is everybody agreed that what we were doing

wasn't working right. Massive, like, that was totally bipartisan. Actually deciding to leave by a particular end date, instead of circumstances, created what was an unmitigated disaster. And in that situation, actually, I was just thinking about him, because the Crown Prince of Bahrain met with the President last night, and I thought about something that he said to me at the time. This was in between administrations. He said, "Everybody's watching." And when you see that situation, which looks like Vietnam, people see, and it emboldens and so in my opinion, things like that beget what happens in Russia, Ukraine people are watching, which begets and emboldens Hamas in particular, really emboldens one individual. If you ever think one person can't change the world, think about Mohammed Sinwar in so many ways.

Collins

So John Hudson, I'll call you by name.

Hudson

Thanks a lot. Appreciate it. Adam, as you know, in May the Trump administration successfully negotiated directly and unilaterally with Hamas for the release of US citizens, even Alexander. That ruffled some feathers in that office, because it was done directly with Hamas with some limited Israeli involvement. Do you think the US should have been striking unilateral deals like this with Hamas earlier on in the war, including during the Biden administration, when Netanyahu, at times, stood in the way of hostage deals and some Americans were killed in Hamas custody.

Boehler

So just, I'm going to clarify one important thing and then make one suggestion. What I'll clarify is that there was no unilateral deal ever possible. While that's an American citizen, Edan, we always were working with the Israeli side. Now whether or not, I think the question is whether or not discussions on that side were but there would be no deal that would be possible, and that wasn't coordinated with the Israelis. So just a clarifying thing on that. The second thing is, I believe, based on what I see and from discussions, that the United States, when we had people there early on, could have made a difference if we had leaned in more at the beginning, I believe that is likely, versus holding back. Now I will say, very easy to judge, you know, from the cheap seats, but I'm not making that judgment by myself. I'm making that judgment from discussion on the military side too. So I think, are there things we could have done better there that would have made a difference for American lives and for Israeli lives, yeah, of course.

Hudson

And in terms of reaching out directly to *[unintelligible]*.

Boehler

No, in terms of being more aggressive in our support of Israel.

Collins

We're really out of time. So I'm going to do one more this is normally during my show, they're the control rooms like rap, rap, I'm gonna get fired.

Unnamed Audience Member

What do you think hostage recovery process teaches us about the strengths, or, you know, negatives of the US interagency process? And if you could change any one thing structurally, culturally, you know, what would it be?

Boehler

I think an administration, a true a choice to be slow and more process oriented, has its positives and negatives. But there's a reason why I work for the President of the United States, and one reason is the action orientation, one or the other. And so interagency processes, if done well, move relatively quickly. There's nothing wrong. You have a very talented group of folks where you can get feedback, but at the end of the day, it shouldn't allow people to not make decisions, hide behind not making decisions and not serve the President of the United States. And I think a bad interagency process slows and does those things. A good one, especially for important decisions, prepares the President with information to make the right call quickly.

Collins

Adam Boehler Thank you for joining us. Thank you all for your great questions.