

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

7.18.24

1:30 — 2:45 PM MDT

Middle East Fireside Chats with Leaders from the Region

[Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa](#), National Security Advisor, Kingdom of Bahrain

Moderator: [David Ignatius](#), Columnist, *The Washington Post*

Discussion recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iefsUww3YUU>

David Ignatius

Sheik Nasser, so thank you for joining us, as I'm sure most people know Bahrain was one of the initial signers of the Abraham accords with Israel. Donald Trump may be on his way back to the White House, but certainly during his first term, one of the genuinely important and praiseworthy achievements of his administration, in my view, was the Abraham Accords, with Saudi Arabia not yet joining, but the UAE Bahrain those accords still hold, even after nine months of a very brutal and difficult war in Gaza, there's been intense Arab anger and opposition to that war, and yet Bahrain continues to be in this relationship with Israel. Explain to us the decision that you've made, both initially in joining the Abraham accords and now in sticking with them.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Thank you very much for the kind words that you said. You know, coming here, first of all, let me address I did my, probably my best mistake. I fell in love with Aspen, which I'll have to come much more often. So simply,

David Ignatius

A good mistake.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Simply going back to the original question again, I would endorse what you said. There's always optimism. I'm from His Majesty's school. We are from the optimist camp, and when we went for the Abraham accord. We didn't have a laundry list, and we didn't have any list that we wanted to achieve first of all, and then we would sign the Abraham accords. Signing the Abraham accords was basically one of the most important milestones that we have achieved. We have opened a channel with the Israelis and the officials and the Israeli government. And I see this is why we should continue, and this is why we should always keep an open door and the channel with the Israelis.

David Ignatius

So an important day in the Middle East that I don't think gets enough recognition, is April 13 to 14 when Iran launched an attack on Israel. Of turned out to be 100 ballistic missiles, probably 250 drones, and it was essentially completely stopped by integrated air defense and extraordinary performance by a number of air forces, obviously led by Israel. What's not widely understood is that cedcom, starting

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

several years ago, organized integrated air defense and radars, including countries in the Arab world such as Bahrain. So that night of April 13 was an important one for Bahrain, and I'd like sure our audience would be interested in hearing what that was like for you what you knew about the Iranian threat as those missiles and drones were launched, and whether you think this air defense integration might be the beginning of some broader regional defense cooperation.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Well, deterrence is our key word, right, and in all aspects when we speak about our region and its conflicts, and especially when we point pinpoint Iran being within the mix, don't forget, Iran is only 200 miles away from the Kingdom of Bahrain. We host the Fifth Fleet command over there with multinational commands as well. So we play a vital role in the deterrence and also the stability of the region. We are proud of it. It's been running out now for more than 75 years, which is a great achievement for the Kingdom of Bahrain. It wasn't only for the kingdom Bahrain, but also for the region. So I refer to my grandfather when he described the Fifth Fleet as the mountain of fire that is protecting us from all threats. Well, that night in specific, you know, we were all in duty, and we are always in close contact with our colleagues and allies and the region itself. Thank God we have a proper integrated system, especially trying to cover our airspace. So this is excellent example for how we should come closer, how we should always integrate our efforts and always layer the map and make sure that we don't let loose any I mean, we should airtight the region in specific but there's so much details to go into that specific attack. We know many countries have been in charge of the deterrence itself, and we are proud as the Kingdom of Bahrain to be part of that integrated system.

David Ignatius

So I just note the importance of that. On that night, many countries as Highness just said, including Bahrain, certainly including Jordan, were part of the defense that prevented the war. If those missiles had landed and hit their targets, we would have been in a very different situation. So I think it's really an important moment, and the fact that Bahrain and other Arab nations were working with the US in Israel needs to be noted. So you mentioned the Iranian threat. It is awfully perilously close to Bahrain. Bahrain, like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has been exploring the possibility, not simply, of deterring Iran with the strong forces. You've got the Fifth Fleet based there in Manama, but also the possibility of engaging Iran through direct diplomacy. I don't think that's widely understood, but maybe you could just say a few words about how your kingdom is thinking about the possibility of perhaps opening direct dialog with Tehran.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Well, we are strong believers in two paths, deterrence and diplomacy as well, and in the art of diplomacy, we should always keep an open door. I know we have cut relations with Iran. We have zero contact with Iran. And I think talking to Iran, like what we have done in the during the Abraham Accords, talking to Israel is always important for us, always important for the security of the region. We should always keep these channels open in order to get a proper structure for our security and stability and harmony in the region. So I am encouraging that we should move forward. And for your information, we

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

have been speaking with the Iranians, and you might have followed or read that His Majesty spoke openly about why we should speak to Iran and open a diplomatic channel. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't always focus on how do we secure our secure our deterrent element and make sure that we are always well integrated together.

David Ignatius

So if this diplomacy went forward, I assume that would mean, among other things, opening embassies in each country.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Well, we are taking baby steps right now. As long as we talk together, we haven't yet met. But what is important, David over here, is we don't have someone in the middle. It is between two capitals, and we will talk direct, and we will lay the points on the table, and we will address it as grown ups and professionals.

David Ignatius

So potentially, watch this space as we, as we say, in my in my business. So I want to introduce the audience to an acronym, set of initials that you may not be familiar with. It's pronounced, I think cecipa, yes, sir, and that stands for comprehensive security integration and prosperity agreement, not not the most beautiful name, probably, but just to give some background, Saudi Arabia has sought from the United States a NATO like agreement that would Have an Article Five that would provide for essentially instantaneous American defense of Saudi Arabia in the event of war that would have to be ratified by the Senate, which at present is, let's just say, a long shot. And Bahrain shows a different course. It's not widely known, but last September, Bahrain and the United States agreed on this agreement, and Sheik Nasir explain what it is, what it would mean for Bahrain if it was attacked by Iran or anybody else, and whether you think it might be a model for other countries, maybe even including your neighbor, Saudi Arabia?

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Well, first of all, SISIFA, I know it's what, not one of the most beautiful abbreviations, especially I'm a Quantico graduate, and I had to read all of your military studies, and they are just full of it. So when I thought I knew English, I came here and I had to figure out everything

David Ignatius

You've cracked. The Pentagon's biggest secret is unpronounceable acronyms

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

So SISIFA, it is one of the most important achievements we have achieved for the Kingdom of Bahrain and the United States. Why? Because it's not just military defense orientated. It is a comprehensive security integration, and also it has the prosperity agreement element in it, if you allow me, with my great memory, I had my notes with me, I would like to point three articles and that agreement, which are

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

the most important things. And believe me, we have fought hard for those articles until we got them right. So Article Two, which is the most important thing, is defense and security cooperation. Article Three is the economic, commercial and trade cooperation. Article four is science, technology and network security. Let me read out a paragraph from Article Two, and then I'll talk about it. I'm quoting SISIFA Right now, any external aggression or threat of external aggression against the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of any of the parties shall be a matter of grave concern to the other parties in the event of external aggression or threat of external aggression against one party, the parties shall, in accordance with their respective constitutions and laws, immediately meet at The most senior levels to determine additional defense needs and to develop and implement appropriate defense and deterrent responses as decided upon the parties, including in the economic, military and or political realms, the parties stand ready to immediately share available and appropriate information and intelligence in response to such an event.

David Ignatius

So, as I mentioned to you yesterday, when we were having a preliminary chat, that language, I would describe thinking about NATO as article four and a half, Article Five in the NATO Treaty promises collective defense and immediate response. Article four says that if there's an attack, there should be immediate consultation. And this, as I say, is in between, and the advantage is it doesn't it's not a treaty. It doesn't have to be ratified. It doesn't have to be so you know, first that I assume you negotiated this with your American counterpart, our national security advisor, or his deputy, Brett McGurk. Is this something you think might be a model for other countries? And is Bahrain working to try to extend this to to the GCC as a whole.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Well, we are right now working on the expansion of this agreement and also letting other countries join the agreement. It started as a bilateral agreement, but it is eventually going to become a multilateral agreement, and looking at a wider scope. It's not just the Middle East. So we are looking at showing that the United States has a lot of friends around the world, and this agreement should bring the true friends altogether. Now what's important about it is I believe that this is the furthest the United States went, and security guarantees to an Arab state. So this is why I hardly suggest that we should go forward. It's a short of Article Five, but has all the guarantees, and I really encourage that, that we we build on it, because it is done in a way so flexible that we can build on it as well.

David Ignatius

So one secret that journalists have is that when we want to know what Saudi Arabia is thinking, but for whatever reason, we can't get through to Saudi leadership. We asked the Bahrainis, you're They're neighbors of Saudi Arabia, your two monarchies in the Middle East, you see the world in very similar ways. So I want to ask you, without obviously you're not speaking in any way for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whether you think Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is ready for normalization of relations with Israel, or the kind that Bahrain has embraced, and whether you think that normalization process is still on track, despite all the recent difficulties and the trauma of the Gaza war.

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

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Saudi Arabia is a key player in the region. We always refer Saudi Arabia as the backbone of the GCC the Gulf states. Again, this is a sovereign thing that the Saudis should decide on. But looking at the wider picture, we all live within an organization that we believe in, which is the Arab League. And during the Arab Summit, we saw that the Arabs today are moving along and heading towards peace. And now that I have mentioned the Arab summit during hosting it in the Kingdom of Bahrain this year, His Majesty announced in his speech a peace conference, and he called for all countries around the world to join the Peace Conference. And meanwhile, while we are we're talking right now, our foreign minister is traveling the world and insisting and making clear that the peace conference is a way forward to bring and unite our our region, because at the end of the day, we all are believers in the region that the solution, our end state, is clear, a two state solution. So this is our end state, but from here until then, we cannot jump start our steps. We should take it step by step, and I would urge a cease fire, because as soon as this is achieved, you know, in your article two days ago, you have underlined the day after. And I have heard that a lot, let's not jump even to the day after. Let's jump, first of all, and put a pose to what's happening and the killing that's happening from both sides. And let's just put an end and order a ceasefire. And then you will see a lot of options layout after the cease of fire. So this is why we recommend that. But again, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the key player as well, and they have been announcing and talking about their ways to get together. Now what we have to make sure and ensure that is the readiness and the seriousness of both parties in this conflict.

David Ignatius

So I know we'd all join in hoping that that ceasefire happens, as you say right now, and I'll just share with the audience, because it's not widely known what King Hamad announced at this Arab League Summit in May, so called Bahrain declaration. I'm just going to quote from it. He called for an international peace conference and irreversible steps, irreversible steps, to implement the two state solution in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative. So every member of the Arab League is on record supporting that. That's a good thing. So Your Highness, you are the only Arab state I believe that is a member of what's called Operation prosperity guardian. Kind of guy might call it OPG again, so and this is the effort to prevent the Houthis in Yemen from firing off drones and missiles and whatever they have at shipping in the Red Sea. It's been very successful every day. You can read a CENTCOM press release announcing that they just took up a couple more Houthi UAVs. But the problem with this is we're basically firing million dollar missiles to shoot down \$1,000 drones, and that's sort of the definition of an unsustainable military campaign. So as a member of the coalition, I want to ask you, what's a better long term solution to get some security in the Red Sea?

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

First of all, I'm a proud Bahraini to be part of OPG as the only state that we have been announcing in our statements, together with the United States and the rest of the countries that are in this operation. Let me do a bit of history as well here the Kingdom of Bahrain and how much we we punch way over our weight. And I believe that this is courage from our leadership ever since back to to 200 years ago. But I'm

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

gonna stick to the US and Bahrain relations. We had the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain more than 75 years. Obviously, the state of department came afterwards, probably to take the credit. But you know, they came after the Fifth Fleet, and then we have started the combined operations of the United States. It wasn't just us hosting the United States, it was us being there, opening our bases to the United States. And we fought communism with you. We fought the Gulf War with you. We have opened all of our bases, and it was full of the American jets and the Kingdom of Bahrain. We were proud, proud at that time. And then we have fought Daesh with you. We were for 40 days alone, fighting ISIS together with you, and then you name it, we have been there. We are a non NATO ally, but we fight hard alongside with the United States. We believe, and because we believe, and there will be no security, there will be no harmony, there will be no stability in the region, unless if we put hands together and take action. And then lately, as you mentioned in the OPG, obviously this operation, us being part of this operation is definitely not against one party, or, let me say, Al Houthis. It is us. They are securing the world's interests, and we see how important it is, and we feel responsible to be part of that, part of this mission, to make sure that we have we continue and maintain the flow. Is it working as good as we expect? I don't believe so, but we there is a margin that we can also improve our operations over there.

David Ignatius

So I just would note that any people meeting in Milwaukee tonight who question the value of American alliances, I hope they'll take a look at what Sheik Nasser just said, because it's illustrative of why alliances are useful, I want to call on our rising leaders for a question. Then I actually want to ask one at the conclusion. But is there somebody from from that group who'd like to ask a question of Sheikh Nasser? Yes, please.

Audience question

Hi, sir, I work for Robert O'Brien, who played a part in the Abraham accords. Can you just tell us a little bit about what the accords have meant to the citizens of the member countries and what normalization has been like?

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

First of all, send my best regards to Robert. So the Abraham Accords, as I tell, as I said in the beginning, we went with zero conditions. We didn't put out a laundry list, because we were believers. And in the Kingdom of Bahrain, we host a synagogue, we host a Jewish community, and happened to be our ambassador was a Jewish woman from Bahrain in the United States. So we are strong believers in coexistence, and how do we live together in peace and stability? So we saw the answers are within the Abraham accords. And also we have thought of, what if things go south, if we sign the Abraham Accords, we still have said we should go forward, open the channels, and I think it did us good more than anything else. So I think this is a great milestone. We would encourage others to join the Abraham accord, and we should leave those accords alive.

David Ignatius

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

So my last question, this is kind of wrapping up. What, to me, has been an unusual, really valuable discussion in the Middle East. So if we had young people from your kingdom, in a world where young people often are very anxious about the future, what would they say about whether they think they'll end up living in a better and safer world.

Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa

I have children myself. I'm a father of five, and I see that coming, and I worry about that every single day. And when I wake up, until I sleep, I ask myself two questions. Number one, do I do I really deserve that sleep tonight or not? And then number two, this is why I'm killing myself every day. But number two is, am I teaching my kids something valuable for their future? Am I teaching them something and showing them something that should stay with them now in Bahrain, me as a National Security Advisor, I'm I'm very much keen in our national identity, because without a past, without a foundation, you do not understand your cause. Now, us and the Kingdom of Bahrain, we do not live up every single day, upon promises we live upon, upon purpose every single day, and what we plan for is not the next week or the next meeting. Is we plan for the next generations. We have identified the issues. We have identified where are the threats within our people, first of all, and then the radius around them. This is why our government is the one that pays the tax for its people to make sure that they are highly educated, number one, and then secured with a job, secured with a purpose, and they understand what are they made of? As Bahrain, I see that in the region, and we are thankful to have a leadership that understands it, identifies it, and also takes action upon it.

David Ignatius

So we've gone from my opening comment about about pessimism to I hope reasons for optimism. Want to ask the audience to join me in thanking Sheik Nasser and all our speakers.