

**CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM GULF ROUNDTABLE ON  
“A RENEWED AGENDA FOR U.S.-GULF PARTNERSHIP”**

**FEATURING AMBASSADOR WILLIAM J. BURNS  
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE**

**Wednesday, February 19, 2014  
Center for Strategic and International Studies  
1616 Rhode Island Ave. NW / Second Floor Conference Room**

**Question & Answer Session\***

**Speaker: Ambassador William J. Burns, Deputy Secretary of State**

**Moderator: Jon Alterman,  
Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy and  
Director, CSIS Middle East Program**

***ALTERMAN:*** Thank you very much. I’m also grateful that you’ve agreed to take some questions. I’ll ask you all to wait for microphones to come to you. And because we only have a very little bit of time before the Deputy Secretary has to dash off to the White House, we’re going to ask everybody to ask just one question. I’m going to start, if I may—

***BURNS:*** I’ll try to give short answers too, which is usually the problem.

***ALTERMAN:*** —in the article the New York Times printed yesterday announcing Rob Malley was joining the NSC staff, the phrasing they used was: Robert Malley, who advised President Bill Clinton on Israeli-Palestinian talks is returning to “manage the fraying ties between the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf.” And I was in Saudi Arabia last month for a research trip—I’m going again in a few weeks— and it’s striking that a number of people that I’ve worked with in Saudi Arabia for many years have said now is a tough time to do this trip. So I’m asking what’s either a one- or three-part question, depending on how you’d like to answer it.

The first part is, from where you sit, are there fraying ties? Is there something going on that would need more active management? I was talking with somebody yesterday who I trust who said that one of the problems in our approach has been we’ve been all too transactional and as we’ve dealt with our Gulf allies we haven’t devoted enough attention to the sort of visceral trust-building activities that they often want. If you agree with that assessment, what would be

\* The as delivered remarks are available separately on <http://csis.org/event/gulf-roundtable-ambassador-william-j-burns>.

your advice to the President as he prepares to go to Saudi Arabia in about six weeks, to try to build a broader sense of trust in addition to the sorts of transactional do-outs that I'm sure will come out of the trip?

**BURNS:** That's a very good question, Jon. The reality, in my view anyway, is that the U.S.-Saudi partnership is as important today as it's ever been. I and many of my colleagues and former colleagues in the audience have lived through lots of challenging times in the Gulf and in the Middle East, but I think the array of challenges across the region right now that animates the efforts of both the United States and Saudi Arabia is probably as complicated as any I've seen in the three decades that I've been an American diplomat.

Objectively, there is a great deal to be gained by working together in dealing with lots of those challenges, even though we're bound to have tactical differences and even though there are bound to be mutual suspicions from time to time. But whether it's in dealing, as I mentioned in my remarks, with the challenge of Gulf security, the continuing challenge posed by Iran's behavior on the nuclear issue but also well beyond it, the huge challenge of Syria and the consequences the continuing civil war has for the rest of the region, the challenge of supporting very complicated transitions in very different places across the region whether it's in Tunisia or in Egypt or in Yemen, all of those I think underscore what we have to gain by working together.

The only way we're going to be able to do that effectively is if we work at it—and that means from the very top, which is exactly what the President is demonstrating in his visit to Saudi Arabia next month, what Secretary Kerry has demonstrated intensively, including in his conversations in the Emiratis yesterday, and what all of us need to demonstrate. It has to be a two-way street. We both need to work at this. But again, I think if we take a step back, it seems to me at least that we have a lot more to gain over the coming months and years by trying to work together and trying to sort through these kinds of challenges together.

**ALTERMAN:** Thank you.

**Q:** *Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council and Al-Monitor.com.* Deputy Secretary Burns, how can you convince the Saudis and others that a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran is in their interests and that it won't increase Iran's ability to affect other developments in the region to the detriment of the Saudis and others?

**BURNS:** Thanks, Barbara. Part of the answer lies in the quality of the agreement, and we're determined to try to build on the first-step agreement that was reached at the end of November to produce a comprehensive solution that demonstrates conclusively the exclusively peaceful purposes of Iran's program. That's a very tall order, as you know as well as anyone, but we're determined to test that proposition because I think the quality of that agreement will go

a long way toward convincing others that it's in their interest, and in the broader interests of Gulf security as well.

Second, as I tried to say in my opening remarks, it's very important for us not only to say, but also demonstrate through our actions, that we understand that there's a whole range of Iranian behavior and Iranian actions that concern us and that can threaten our interests and the interests of our friends not just in the Gulf but across the region, from Lebanon and Syria to Yemen and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula itself. And so what we want to do is try to demonstrate through our actions that we not only appreciate those kind of challenges but that we want to work together with our partners in the Gulf to deal with them. I think those are the only ways, it seems to me, to try to drive home the seriousness of our approach.

**Q: Josh Rogin, *The Daily Beast*.** In recent days, Secretary Kerry has spoken very publicly and openly about a new process to examine both old and new options for increasing American involvement in the Syria crisis. It's been widely reported that these options include providing greater transportation and intelligence to moderate, vetted Syrian rebel groups as well as possibly paying the salaries of some of these rebels. Is that the entire universe of options that are under consideration? There's also been some disputed reporting that the U.S. has dropped its objections to Gulf countries providing Syrian rebels with anti-aircraft weapons, including MANPADS. Is that true, or is that not true? And is there an expectation that even if these options were pursued that this would be enough to turn the tide or at least maintain the balance between the rebels and an increasingly aggressive regime military onslaught? Thank you.

**BURNS:** Thanks, Josh. And thanks for trying to bring my checkered career to an abrupt end with a very good question., I can't obviously go into a lot of detail about the sorts of things that we continue as a government to try to look at., It's been obvious for some time that the longer the civil war in Syria goes on, the greater the dangers not just to the people of Syria but to the wider region. And you see that in terms of the impact on Jordan, Lebanon, on what's going on in Iraq today.

And it becomes extraordinarily important, I think, for the United States to continue to look at everything we can do to bolster the moderate opposition, both as a means of trying to create the circumstances in which a negotiated transition of leadership is possible, because there's been zero evidence so far in the Geneva process of seriousness on the part of the Syrian regime, but also bolstering the moderate opposition as an investment in the kind of Syria that, ultimately, Syrians deserve, a Syria that respects minority groups, that represents tolerance and pluralism and that's going to be able to stand against the violent extremist groups who increasingly are drawn to the magnet of Bashar al-Assad.

So it's a very tall order. As I said earlier, I don't have any prescription to offer publicly today, but I think across the administration, we do realize what's at stake and the urgency of the situation.

**Q: Raphael Danziger, a consultant to AIPAC.** My question is the following. You said that your policy is to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, acquiring, I think you said. Is it also a policy to prevent Iran from becoming a threshold nuclear weapon state, in other words, one within a few weeks can get a nuclear weapon if it wants to?

**BURNS:** Part of the challenge of negotiations, as you know very well, is to try to translate our broad objective, the one we share, I think, with our negotiating partners in the P-5+1 and the rest of the international community, and that's to ensure the exclusively peaceful purposes of Iran's program. And to translate that into what's being negotiated, which is a long-term period in which Iran, through limitations and constraints, demonstrates the seriousness of its commitment and deals with some of the questions of breakout and other kinds of questions that are widely shared concerns, not just in the United States, but certainly in the Gulf as well.

That's the challenge, the huge challenge of negotiations, which we began to address in the first-step agreement. Now in negotiations for a comprehensive solution, it is going to be much, much more complicated. That's what we're going to have to wrestle with in the coming months.

**Q: Mindy Reiser. Vice President of an NGO called Global Peace Services USA.** I would like to know how, with your rich and long experience with Russia, do you think that Russia can be induced to play a more helpful role in a number of the crises that the part of the world we've been discussing faces and what you think would inspire Mr. Putin to be more helpful.

**BURNS:** Well, I learn something new about Russia every day. So my humility only continues to grow about that very complicated relationship.

I think if you look across the range of issues that we've been talking about today, we've worked reasonably well with Russia on the Iran nuclear negotiations. I think we share, in general terms, their concern about the potential for Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon and the destabilizing effect that that would have across a region that matters to both of us.

On the Palestinian issue, Russia has largely seen eye-to-eye with the United States on the importance of trying to revive that process, and certainly the Russians have been supportive of Secretary Kerry and President Obama's efforts over the course especially of the past year.

Syria's been a tougher challenge. We work together on the narrower but important issue of chemical weapons, even though the pace of progress on that is not as fast as I think either of

us would like —the pace of progress toward the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile.

We’ve had less success, to be honest, in working together on the Geneva process. As I said earlier, there’s been zero evidence so far of seriousness on the part of the Syrian regime. And I think Russia has a role to play in using all of its leverage to try to move toward what is the goal of the Geneva 1 communiqué, which is to produce a transitional governing body with full executive powers reached by mutual consent —the key to the kind of negotiated transition that both of us have pledged support for. But I think it’s going to be very important for Russia to use all the influence that it can to help bring that about. That’s something that’s going to be crucial to making any kind of diplomatic progress on that issue.

Russia, it seems to me , objectively, shares a concern about the growth of violent extremism across the Middle East, a part of the world geographically that’s very proximate to Russia and that can affect security interests in Russia itself. And therefore, as you look at the growth of violent extremists, the way in which foreign fighters have been drawn to Syria over the course of the last year, again there should be a shared sense of urgency with Russia about trying to produce that kind of political transition, because the continuation of the Assad regime is the surest way to make that problem worse. It’s not the solution to the problem.

**ALTERMAN:** Great. I know you have to run, so if I could ask you all to remain seated, so the Deputy Secretary can make it out to the White House.

Before you go, I want to thank you. I want to thank our partners with the UAE Embassy. Thank you all for coming. We look forward to seeing you again soon. (Applause.)

**BURNS:** Thanks.