# Episode Transcript:

## Episode Title:
## U.S. Restraint in the Middle East

## Guest:
## Senator Chris Murphy

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**Jon Alterman:**
Senator Chris Murphy is a second-term U.S. senator from Connecticut and chair of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism. Before his election to the U.S. Senate in 2013, Senator Murphy served for three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, and in recent years he's established an impressive record as a thinker and writer on the Middle East. Senator Murphy, welcome to Babel.

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

**Jon Alterman:**
You've spoken and written about how U.S. policies in the Middle East are tied to our past and not either to our present work or to our future. How would you define U.S. interests in the Middle East now and going forward? What should we decide that we really need to try to do something about?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
My primary worry is that we have not done a present assessment of the threats that are presented the United States in the Middle East, nor our interests. We still believe it's 1985 when it is not. The Saudis and Emiratis cooperate with the United States on an awful lot, but they are acting very differently today than they were 30 years ago. They are acting contrary to our interest all over the region, and we should reorient our relationship with those countries so that we aren't empowering their bad behavior. Similarly, I think we have to look at our security footprints in the region. We spent billions of dollars putting massive numbers of troops in bases spread throughout the region. I don't think that actually increased our security interests either any longer. What we want is to try to midwife a conversation about a regional security architecture, in which the Iranians and the Saudis and the Emiratis aren't constantly battling with each other through proxy fights. I don't think that our current position in the region—whereby we are essentially giving the Saudi side whatever they need—is actually leading to that détente or to that conversation happening.

**Jon Alterman:**
I know you've had a lot of conversations with the Jordanian leadership. You like the Jordanian leadership. When I talk to the Jordanian leadership, one of the things they're really preoccupied with is Iran, and I think one of the places where their focus is right across the border in Lebanon. Lebanon is a place the Iranians, despite sanctions, have put hundreds of millions of dollars a year into supporting Hezbollah. The Gulf States have decided they're not going to support Lebanon as long as Hezbollah has the foothold that it has. How should the United States think about Lebanon. Is it important that we commit to Lebanon? Should we care about trying to minimize Iranian influence in Lebanon, or do we say, "You know what, it's another proxy battle. It doesn't really affect American livelihoods. It doesn't affect American lives. We can walk away from Lebanon." How do we apply it to Lebanon?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
I don't think we can walk away from Lebanon, in part because right now it's a Cold War between the Iranians and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). My worry is that if Lebanon falls apart, it will become the next Syria. It will be the preoccupation of the region—and of the United States—for the next 20 years and a source of great instability that may actually give rise to terrorist organizations that have designs on the United States. I would argue that the United States should make a sizable commitment to reform in Lebanon, and that we should draw a harder line with the Saudis. You are right that the Saudis have essentially walked away. They are deeply uncomfortable with the role that Hezbollah plays. The Saudis should come to terms with the fact that—at least in the short term—Hezbollah is going to be part of the political infrastructure there. It would be much better for the Saudis to be a partner with the

United States—with the French and other countries—to try to offer the kind of economic support that might provoke political reform that would eventually allow for technocrats and non-sectarian actors to have greater influence in the government. That would lessen the influence of Hezbollah, so I think the Saudis decision to step away and the United States' tepid involvement in Lebanon right now is an invitation for collapse—and ultimately, an invitation for a tremendous amount of instability that will threaten the United States.

**Jon Alterman:**
It's tricky that on the one hand, we want to get our distance from the Saudis. We want the Saudis to come closer to us. We want the Emiratis to come closer to us and support our priorities in Iraq, Lebanon, and other places where we're interested in having them put aside their doubts about the wisdom of our strategy and supporting our strategy. But then we don't want to give them the kind of security that they feel they need in the face of what they see as Iranian designs on the region.

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
I just think it's time to play hardball with the Saudis. I don't believe this argument that the Saudis are going to walk away from a security alliance with the United States. They will never get from the Chinese nor the Russians what they get from the United States today. Yes, they want more. They want us to be tougher on Iran, but they don't have another potential partner like the United States. I think it's time for us, both with the Saudis and the Emiratis, to say to them, "Listen, if you want us as a security partner, then we expect you to line up with our priorities on Yemen, on Lebanon, and if you're not willing to do that, then we're going to have a conversation in the United States as to whether we're going to be in business together any longer." They don't see another security partner with the capabilities of the United States has, and we should recognize that.

**Jon Alterman:**
When I've talked to people in the U.S military about the Emirati role in Yemen, it is appreciation for and recognition of the Emirati role in counterterrorism missions in Yemen. How do we parse out the stuff that countries do that we feel advances our interests and the things that they do that we feel undermine them? How can we disaggregate the stuff that they do that we want them to do more of and the stuff we want them to do a lot less of?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
We have become a counterterrorism state. We view so many of our partnerships through this narrow lens of special operations cooperation. We look at what the Emiratis have done with us in Yemen over the last 10 years and we chalk it up as a success because at the special operations level, they have been working with us to target discrete communities of bad news, whereas during that entire time they have been perpetuating a war there that guarantees there will be space for the bad guys to continue to operate and multiply. Egypt cooperates, but then they run jails that essentially birth terrorists. There are tens of thousands of political prisoners who weren't terrorists when they went in but are often affiliated with these groups when they come out because of the radicalization that occurs there.

**Jon Alterman:**
The Washington view—and, frankly, a view that I'm sympathetic to—is that Egypt needs to have more pluralism, more tolerance, more diversity of views. And yet, I look throughout the Middle East and, in a way that I find troubling, I see a lot of popular authoritarians, that is governments that would certainly crack down on a small number of people, but which continue to enjoy the support of large parts of their population. Large parts of the population aren't looking for openness. Large parts of the population are looking for efficient government. They're looking for prosperity. They're looking for other kinds of things. As the U.S. government looks at this challenge, how should we think about the fact that for a lot of people

in the Middle East, China seems like a very attractive model. That is, you have a surveillance state that has tremendous power but seems to deliver security and prosperity. Is that a threat to us? Is that something we ignore? Is it something we need to undermine?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
The attractiveness of an alliance with China is also due to the economic power and the economic reach of China. They come to these nations bearing substantial economic gifts—more than the United States can provide. That is one of the reasons that the United States should be doing a radical reform of our foreign policy toolkit. All we have available to us right now in Egypt is public shaming and the withdrawal of military aid, whereas the Chinese will come in with much more significant economic promise than the United States can today. We should learn from the success the Chinese have had, and we should empower agencies— whether it be USAID or the Development Finance Corporation—with the kind of economic assets that can be comparable to the Chinese, which right now we can't even imagine as a government. That's in part because no one was ever competing with us on that playing field. We never had to staff up and resource up on economic development because we were the only game in town, but we're not anymore. It's not good enough to just offer some ships or some guns. You have to actually be able to offer real development in a way that we can't today.

**Jon Alterman:**
There's the development and economic piece, and then there's the security piece, and a lot of our allies in the Middle East—not just in the Gulf, but Jordan and elsewhere—see Iran as a constant destabilizing factor. When I talk to Iranian officials, they'll say, "Look, we're just involved supporting democracy and democratic countries, and there are countries that like us, and parties we support, just like you support parties." But countries in the region see Iran as a constant force of destabilization. How do you think we should be pursuing changing Iranian behavior?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
I have met regularly with the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, over the years—and I take everything he says with a large shaker of salt—and he always reminds me that Iran's missiles are not pointed at Israel; they're pointed at Saudi Arabia, and Iran sees our massive influence and arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis as provocative. Part of the reason why I think we should be de-securitizing our relationship with allies in the Gulf is because I think we are contributing to this massive escalation of military activity and arms buildup in the region. I think part of the solution here is for the United States to step back and lessen its militaristic footprint in the region. I think that doing so will be less provocative. I think it will perhaps create the space for there to be conversations between the Iranians and the Saudis, and you see the grassroots of those conversations already happening. You see some important beginnings of talks between the Iranians and the Saudis. If we were to make commitments about the limit of our military ambitions in the region, I think that that would certainly help. Obviously, we can talk about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but I think that having some successful long-term diplomatic agreements between the United States and the Iranians will help build confidence for other diplomatic arrangements—either formal or informal—to be entered into that perhaps lower the temperature in the region. These are all important preconditions to be able to address what is a very real concern about the malevolent destabilizing behavior of Iran in region.

**Jon Alterman:**
Is there a role for deterrence, or does deterrence just lead us down the pathway of the Iranians using asymmetric forces to undermine us and it just keeps wrapping us in? What else should we think about military

capacity—both the United States' and others'—as we think about shaping the choices Iran makes?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
What is the extent of U.S. interest in the region? How much does it matter to the United States what share of power Iran and Saudi Arabia have in the region 10 or 20 years from now? We act as if that question is existential to the United States. I'm not sure that it is. I'm not saying that we don't have any interest in it, but if you're positing a question as to whether we share the providing security guarantees big enough to provide deterrence against the Iranians—for instance, creating red lines about what they can and cannot do in a place like Lebanon—I don't necessarily know if that is commensurate with our interest in the region. We have an interest in keeping the Iranians at bay. We have an interest in continuing to work with our partners, but I don't know that it is such a significant interest that we should be dramatically increasing the security presence of the United States in the region. There's going to be a fight between the Saudis and the Iranians for a long time. There are other things that matter more to the United States right now than who wins that contest.

**Jon Alterman:**
As the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations' Middle East subcommittee, how concerned are you about China in the Middle East? What should we be worried about, and what should we not worried about?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
As a frame, I force the fight between Chinese-style autocracy and American-style democracy as the defining battle of the next 100 years, so I don't want to underestimate the threat that I believe the Chinese present to the United States and our way of life. I think it is perhaps existential. At the same time, I don't worry about the Chinese in the Middle East in the same way that I'm worried about the Chinese in Europe, because we're not talking about democracies, by and large, in the Middle East. We're not talking about the Chinese undermining the participatory rights of individuals. I also don't think the Chinese, at least in the next 20 years, have the kind of military hardware necessary to pry away our security allies from the United States. I also think China has largely gotten a free ride in the region. They need the oil more than the United States does, but it's been our military that has guaranteed the relatively free flow of oil out of the Middle East. Much of that oil is now going to China, not to the United States. Query about whether we should be so antithetical to China having to expand a little additional dollar in the region, in order to make sure that they get the oil that they need. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be worried about China's influence in the region, but I worry much more about Chinese authoritarianism creeping into Eastern Europe and the Balkans than I do in the Middle East.

**Jon Alterman:**
Although when I when I talked to U.S. Asian partners—the South Koreans, the Japanese—they're extremely concerned with the U.S. giving China more space in the Middle East, for fear that the United States rebalancing out of the Middle East actually weakens the United States in East Asia because it gives China power over South Korea and Japan, which for the foreseeable future are going to be very reliant on the Middle East for oil and gas.

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
What matters to the most important countries in the region, with respect to oil and energy export, is security partnerships. I understand what the Chinese are doing with drone technology in the UAE, and what they're doing with missile technology in Saudi Arabia, but those partnerships and those capabilities are still on the margin. Given the threat that our partners in the Middle East believe is presented by Iran, I don't think they're willing to walk away from the United States and get all of their security guarantee from the Chinese. The

Chinese also aren't interested in that as well. The Chinese love where it stands now, which is that the United States provides the security guarantee, and then they can provide smaller security systems on the margins and economic partnerships in order to get what they need. That comes at a much lower cost to the Chinese than it does to the United States.

**Jon Alterman:**
And they can be on both sides of the GCC-Iranian rivalry.

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
Right. They don't have to make a choice because they're not in the security business. Right now, we are demanded by the Saudis and the Emiratis to be on their side 100 percent of the time. The Chinese aren't. Just query whether, if the Chinese had to get a bit more involved on the security side, would they get hung up by many of the same policy choices that the United States is faced with making?

**Jon Alterman:**
How did you get into this business? How did you get interested in the Middle East? I didn't see it much on your resume, but you've taken a very prominent role in a lot of the big and hard questions. How did this start?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
It started when I ran for Congress as an opponent of the Iraq War. I came to Congress, but I became uncomfortable with my position, which was a deep skepticism of U.S military involvement overseas. I saw my party starting to become a bit more isolationist in the wake of the Iraq War—making the claim that it was time for the United States to pack up and come home. That didn't seem to be the right answer given the real security threats that still existed to the United States—given the nature of the global economy or the problems, like climate change, that are facing United States, which don't seem to have any solution other than an international one. I challenged myself at the end of my time in the House and beginning of my time in the Senate to come up with this answer. I wasn't okay with my foreign policy advocacy beginning and ending at arguing for the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It didn't seem intellectually defensible, so I just went on a course of study and a course of learning. What I learned really disturbed me. The more that I dug into the way in which the United States balances military funding versus nonmilitary funding in our foreign policy toolkit, it looked like a recipe to fail. It looked like we had made a massive mistake, especially in the face of the Russians and the Chinese scaling up all of their nonmilitary tools that can influence friends and adversaries. I just became more passionate about that rebalance. As I studied our footprint in the Middle East, I just couldn't understand why we work so reliantly on an association with the Gulf states, given how many ways they were undermining our interests. It didn't make sense to me how we're really securitizing the war there, so it was a study that came out of my discomfort about a more limited foreign policy vision I had as a new Member of Congress. It has now birthed what I hope is an impactful voice on these matters in the region.

**Jon Alterman:**
You've talked a lot about what we should do less of. As you look forward, what should President Biden be doing a lot more of in the Middle East that the administration is not doing?

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
Let me just defend restraint. I don't understand your question to mean that we always have to be substituting and adding in equal measure. I think sometimes there are reasons for the United States to play less of a role. I wrote a piece for the *New York Times* years ago arguing why the United States should have never entered the Syrian war and how restraints—a decision to do less—actually would have led to peace earlier in Syria than the half measures that we engaged in. I always want to be very comfortable saying that there doesn't have to

be a substitute for disengagement, but there are things we should be doing more of in the region. Again, I'll use Lebanon as an example. Our primary line of participation with Lebanon today is on the military side, but we should be able to offer Lebanon much more than we are today. We could offer them help to manage their refugees and economic support to help them power out of this crisis. We can't imagine that because we're spending 10 times as much money on an annual basis on military systems as we are on economic development and refugee assistance. If we did have a significant amount of money to spend there, then we could be much more influential in trying to steer the course of events towards reform, but what we have to offer there is just not good enough to get the elites in Lebanon to give up the pyramid scheme that they have concocted and that is falling apart as we speak. That's not a terribly sophisticated answer, but I do think there are places in the Middle East that would like more than what we offer right now, which is, by and large, security support.

**Jon Alterman:**
Senator Chris Murphy, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

**Senator Chris Murphy:**
Thanks, Jon.