



American Foreign Policy Council

Conference Summary

2025 “Airlie Dialogue”

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AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

AIRLIE DIALOGUE 2025

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On February 12th, the American Foreign Policy Council convened its third “Airlie Dialogue” conference at the University Club in Washington, DC. The full-day event brought together leading scholars, officials and experts for a day of discussions about the common intellectual fight against Islamic extremism, and the “war of ideas” now taking place in the Muslim World. What follows is a summary of the conference’s proceedings.

The conference was kicked off by a keynote address from Sebastian Gorka, Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the U.S. National Security Council. In his remarks, Dr. Gorka outlined the Trump administration’s counterterrorism strategy, emphasizing that the new White House had inherited a complex and multifaceted global security environment in which the *jihadist* threat was increasing while available resources to combat it were declining. He identified five key challenges in this regard: the wider geographic dispersion of *jihadist* groups; their growing technological capabilities; their adaptability to changing security environments; their ability to exploit global vulnerabilities, and; security risks at the southern U.S. border.

Dr. Gorka stressed the need to empower the military and use it effectively, to strengthen partnerships with allied counterterrorism actors, and clarified that “America First” does not mean isolationism but rather leadership among nations that share values with the U.S. In this conception, he emphasized, the U.S. would stand by its allies but expected them to also take on responsibilities for security and policing. He highlighted the administration’s approach of fusing kinetic military action with intelligence capabilities, while also emphasizing the importance of tackling the core ideology of *jihadist* groups.

The conference’s first panel looked at “The Future of the Abraham Accords,” focusing on the sustainability of regional normalization, challenges facing existing partnerships forged under the rubric of the Accords, and the potential for these ties to expand further. While the Accords initially saw strong international engagement, ongoing conflicts have tested their vision and approach. However, regional integration and people-to-people connections remain vital for long-term security and economic stability in the Greater Middle East. And despite the trauma of recent conflicts, the Accords have demonstrated resilience and

underscored the importance of regional partnerships. The discussion noted that Iran's recent regional actions were, in part, a response to the Accords, raising questions about whether the focus should be on expanding the agreements or deepening existing commitments.

While the Accords represent a historic milestone, significant challenges remain. In particular, the ongoing Gaza conflict has cast a pall over further development, making it harder for regional governments to communicate the benefits of the Accords to their people. There is also uncertainty about the role the U.S. will play, as its commitment to the region is viewed as inconsistent. While expansion remains a possibility, the lack of new signatories this far has raised some concerns about long-term viability. Here, economic incentives can play a key role in maintaining momentum, particularly given Saudi Arabia's interest in both regional stability and economic development. However, political realities, such as Israel's present stance on future Palestinian sovereignty, make further expansion challenging.

The conference's second panel addressed "Israel and the Palestinians, Post-October 7th," and featured an in-depth discussion on the changing dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Panelists discussed shifting public opinion among both Palestinians and Israelis. Palestinian support for Hamas initially surged, but later declined, particularly in Gaza, while hardline Israeli views also intensified, with increased backing for the annexation of Gaza and less belief in the viability of a "two-state solution." A key topic was the new debate, prompted by President Trump's recent comments, of the potential resettlement of Gazans. A growing percentage of Gazans have expressed a desire to leave, contradicting claims that such a relocation would be entirely forced. However, closed borders, the lack of viable safe harbors, and domestic pressure from Hamas have effectively trapped this population in the Gaza Strip.

The panel's discussion also addressed reconstruction plans for Gaza, including a now-abandoned proposal to divide the territory into four self-governed sectors. The evolving U.S. approach under the Trump administration has pressured Arab states to engage more actively in finding a solution, though regional leaders have been reluctant to do so. However, panelists noted, some non-Arab Muslim nations, such as Malaysia and states in sub-Saharan Africa, may be more open to playing an active role in addressing the present crisis.

The conference's third panel dealt with "The Changing Iranian Challenge," and provided a comprehensive analysis of Iran's shifting political landscape and regional influence. Once a dominant power in the Levant, Iran has been forced to retreat from key areas such as Syria, and its proxies near Israel have weakened significantly in recent months. The Iranian leadership, traditionally reliant on a "forward defense" strategy to project power beyond its borders, now faces new vulnerabilities, panelists noted. The cost of maintaining its regional influence, combined with economic sanctions and growing isolation, has placed immense pressure on the regime.

Domestically, meanwhile, the Islamic Republic finds itself at its weakest point in decades. Public opinion in Iran has shifted dramatically, with surveys indicating that only a small

fraction of the population supports the Islamic Republic. Most Iranians reject religious governance, and the country is no longer predominantly Muslim by self-identification. The panelists also discussed internal divisions within the IRGC, noting that while it remains a powerful ideological force, generational and factional splits within it do exist. The military establishment remains unlikely to stage a coup, as its leadership is deeply committed to the regime. However, if Iran's economic and political situation deteriorates further, instability within the ranks could become more pronounced. The Trump administration thus faces a critical decision on Iran policy, the panelists concluded – whether to pursue a narrow deal to temporarily stabilize relations or adopt a more aggressive approach aimed at undermining the regime. Regardless of the approach taken, Iran's future remains uncertain, with mounting domestic discontent and external pressures shaping the trajectory of the regime.

The conference's concluding panel on "AI and Extremism" delved into the intersection of technology and security. The panel highlighted how emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), are shaping both terrorism and counterterrorism efforts. The experts noted that technology has become a double-edged sword, providing extremist groups with tools to communicate, radicalize individuals, and spread propaganda online. This process, which was previously difficult to detect, is becoming more efficient with AI, creating new challenges. AI, and its intersection with other emerging technologies, has made radicalization faster and more pervasive, especially given AI's global accessibility through widely available devices like smartphones. In particular, the rapid proliferation of AI tools in the "Global South" is further complicating counterterrorism efforts, providing both adversaries and potential allies with the same tools.

The panel also explored how AI can be used to counter extremism. Media literacy programs and education about the quality of information represent vital strategies to combat disinformation and radical narratives. Additionally, AI-powered tools, such as chatbots, can be harnessed to improve de-radicalization efforts on the part of law enforcement authorities. Moreover, while the convergence of AI with other technologies has created new opportunities for extremist groups to spread their message, it has also empowered local communities to develop countermeasures using the same tools.