

Trita Parsi: Middle East Unraveling — Are We on the Path to World War?

Trita Parsi is the co-founder and Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Follow his excellent Substack: <https://tritaparsi.substack.com/> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdiesen Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Trita Parsi, the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Parsi also publishes very insightful analysis on his Substack, and I have left a link in the description, so make sure to sign up and follow his work. So, it's great to see you again. How have you been? Good to see you. Good job.

#Trita Parsi

As good as it gets, I guess. That's a good answer.

#Glenn

Well, I see, yeah, well, we seem to be heading into very problematic times. That is, the U.S. may be planning quite an imminent massive strike on either Iran or Yemen. And we also see on the Iranian side, they're now pushing mass mobilization efforts. Their military has announced that they're preparing for what is a prolonged war. They also said that if the United States carries through with this massive strike, their retaliation this time around would look at changing targets, the weapons they use, and the retaliation, well, in their language, would be without limits. So, again, you see both sides ready to go up the escalation ladder here. So how are you assessing these recent developments?

#Trita Parsi

Yeah, this is in line with what we talked about, I think, last week, that we are on a trajectory of escalation and limited diplomatic efforts. So I shouldn't say limited. The reason I say limited is because the U.S. is largely not part of them. There's a lot of diplomatic activity going on between the Qataris, Pakistanis, and Iranians on the U.S.-Iran front; between Oman, Iran, and the GCC states on

the Straits; between Iran and Saudi directly at a very intense level in regards to the Houthis. So there's a lot of diplomatic activity going on, but I'm not seeing any appetite on the American side for any real engagement at this point. And the reason for this is partly because the U.S. side believes that they've already paid the price, the political price for this war.

Not much is going to change, meaning that they're not going to lose more support over the course of the next couple of weeks. But they're also not going to gain back any people if they engage in any type of diplomatic activity at this point. But also because their view is they're really increasingly convinced that the Iranians are just going to try to destroy Trump's presidency. And as a result, the Iranians are not going to be serious about a real deal. So diplomacy will be inconclusive. It will be limited. It will never really bring about the type of conclusion that Trump is looking for. And the Iranians are never going to give him any real concessions because ultimately they just want to destroy his presidency.

And the Iranians, on their side, don't believe that a deal with Trump really is sustainable. But even if he says yes, he's not going to honor it for more than a couple of days. He keeps on changing his mind. They don't view him as mentally stable. And at a minimum, that means they're not going to agree to give any major concessions, irreversible concessions, for a deal that Trump will not honor. They may do some small things to avoid the worst escalation or try to just stabilize the situation temporarily, but there's not going to be any real gives. And as long as the two sides have that type of attitude and that type of perception of the other, the diplomatic openings are very, very limited. And simultaneously, we're on a trajectory that is not stable, but is actually escalatory.

#Glenn

What do we know, though, about the possible diplomatic off-ramps? That is, well, I guess two questions. Is the MOU now dead because we kind of have a deal? Or do you see the United States returning to this under any conditions? Or do they demand revisions? And also, with this other, you know, regional diplomatic efforts happening, is this pretty much behind closed doors? Are we told anything about content and how much they have advanced?

#Trita Parsi

So let me first start off with the MOU. The American side has made it very clear: they're not going to return to the MOU. And the prevailing view—I don't think this was the case in the beginning—but the prevailing view now appears to be that they got lucky that they found this exit out of the MOU, that the MOU was not ultimately good for the U.S. Now, some people are saying this as if this was always the case. It was not. When the MOU first was signed, there were elements in the White House who were very content with it, Trump included, Vance faction, obviously. But what happened was that the knives came out from many of the other factions, from the Pentagon, from State Department and Marco Rubio, some other elements in the deep state and CIA who were very, very critical of the deal and who wanted, again, this kind of a maximalist approach.

And by now, there isn't any support in the current administration for anything that looks like a return to the MOU. On the Iranian side, they have insisted that it has to be the MOU. But I'm seeing a nuance there that I think is important. I don't know if it's sufficient. And that is that the Iranians are saying that the beginning, the entry point of the talks, has to be the MOU. But the exit point, meaning what happens in the negotiations, can lead to an agreement that looks very different from the MOU. But the starting point has to be the MOU. So they're not married to the MOU, but they cannot discard the MOU unless it is discarded within a negotiation.

That may provide a bit of an opening because the Trump administration are saying flat out no to anything that is the MOU. But if it's just a starting point and then it evolves into something else, perhaps that is sufficient of a nuance for Trump to regain some interest in diplomacy. I'm still skeptical, but I think it shows that there's a realization on the Iranian side that just insisting on the MOU is not going to bring any meaningful diplomacy back. Now, they may say that they're open to it being the starting point and evolving to something different. But my fear is that now the two sides are so far away from each other in terms of their positions that I'm not really sure if diplomacy at this point actually would be de-escalatory, rather than actually fueling an escalation, because a quick failure in the talks can actually bring about another round of war sooner than it otherwise would.

#Glenn

I was thinking, if I was sitting in Tehran and my overarching objective would be to put an end to the regional security architecture, which is essentially an anti-Iranian alliance, and kick the United States out of the region, you could go another way about this. You could also convince the regional actors to essentially do so, that is, to distance themselves from the United States. Is this, you know, can the Iranians achieve this through regional diplomacy?

I see that, well, in one of your articles on Substack, you write that the former CIA director, David Petraeus, he admitted that the American bases in the region are no longer viable. Again, if the Gulf states see it the same way, wouldn't that partly achieve the Iranian goal? And, well, also, let's make the question a little bit larger. As we know, the Saudis, they called on Trump for help twice, and he declined. Again, what would be the consequences? Because if the Iranians want a death sentence for the regional security architecture being aimed against them, wouldn't this essentially be a big step towards that end?

#Trita Parsi

Yeah. So let me start off with the first part of the question. Yes, from the Iranian standpoint, they want to see these bases be shut down and the American military presence in the region dramatically reduced. I don't know, however, if it is so useful for them to insist on it at this point, because I think on the American side, there may very well end up being an opportunity here to just finally get out of the region. But it's more difficult for the American side to do so if it is seen as a capitulation to

Iranian demands. Similarly, some of the GCC states, they fully understand that it's going to be very difficult to be able to sustain these bases.

You know, who would want to pay for them to be rebuilt, mindful of how useless they proved to be in many ways? But at the same time, they don't want to give it up right now until they first have some sort of an alternative defense plan in place so that they don't end up becoming completely vulnerable. And then there's another element. The degree of escalation is now reaching levels that go far beyond what we talked about earlier on. We're talking about a situation now in which, on the Kuwaiti side, there is legitimate fear that if the escalation continues, just what the Houthis did in southern Yemen, Iraqi militias may do and just take over Kuwait altogether.

The government in Bahrain should also be very worried about its own future. So we're talking about levels of escalation now that may actually rewrite the political geography of the region. Under those circumstances, faced with those types of threats, these states are desperate, and they're looking to whatever they can to get some sort of protection from the U.S. or, frankly, from Israel. I think a lot of the conversations about the Kuwaitis potentially joining the Abraham Accords is precisely because of this, the belief that they are now faced with a situation in which the country actually may get invaded. It also tells you something about the danger of the level of escalation we're at right now.

Up until this point, the escalation, however problematic it was, was nevertheless very carefully calibrated. And particularly on the Iranian side, they were very meticulous of how they escalated and how they wanted to go up the escalation ladder, not too fast, not too slow. But if we have a scenario in which some of these governments end up falling, which is largely triggered because the Saudis decided to attack the airport in Sana'a, which then re-triggered a war with Yemen, with the Houthis, and as a consequence of that, now we're seeing a further escalation in which some of these governments may fall. We're talking about a scenario in which no one actually can control the escalation any longer. It will not be calibrated.

It will quickly get out of control. That's a very dangerous situation because it means that the kind of de-escalatory options that may exist now may not exist in the future. There will be far fewer, at a minimum. And even if they exist, it will be very difficult to exercise because governments, by and large, have lost control of the situation. We're not there yet, but I fear that we're getting closer to that scenario unless something happens to really be able to reverse the trajectory and move towards recovery, some sort of de-escalatory diplomacy. And here is where the Saudi side of this also comes in. You saw here that every time this happens, the Saudis make a phone call to the United States.

Now they're also making phone calls to others. They're calling the Chinese. They're calling the Turks. They're calling everyone. Because most of these states, at the end of the day, cannot stand up for themselves, do not have the capacity to defend themselves. They have put their security in the hands of someone else. And that someone is not that interested in providing that security anymore.

This creates this inherent sense of insecurity, which is at least one important factor as to why it's been difficult between the Iranians and the GCC states to get to some sort of an equilibrium. Because one side is completely self-sufficient, or at least more or less.

It faced a war with two nuclear-weapon states, did not get any meaningful help from China or Russia except for satellite images, and has managed to sustain that war and potentially even inflict a major strategic loss on the U.S., whereas these other states cannot do anything without having to make a bunch of phone calls to other countries. That imbalance makes it very difficult to find the kind of political maturity and confidence to be able to move in the direction of a security architecture that is self-sustained, that is held up by the region on its own rather than by exterior powers. Now, having said that, in the absence of the United States, what are these countries going to do?

They may be desperate and turn towards Israel, but in the long run, that's not going to work either. Part of what I wrote on Substack is the necessity for these states to recognize that they have to build a security architecture together with the Turks, with the Egyptians, with the Pakistanis, and the Iranians that provides security for the region on their own instead of being so reliant on outside powers. This reliance on outside powers is clearly a curse for the region as a whole, but particularly for these states. And to the extent that they continue to believe that there is some sort of a savior in the White House that they just need to call up and everything will be fine, that sentiment, that belief, that mentality is in and of itself a threat to regional security, in my view.

#Glenn

What you're describing, though, as you and I spoke about before, is a shift in world order as well, because the regional security architecture—you could almost replace some of the words there with the Europeans, because they did the same, essentially. They put themselves all on the front line, essentially risking war with the Russian Federation, believing that, you know, the American savior would come if something goes wrong. And now that the U.S. is pulling back and not able to defeat the opponent, the insecurity is there. They're looking for simple solutions. But again, the real solution might be to actually move away from that alliance or bloc politics towards something inclusive. Yeah.

But what you said about Kuwait, though, I thought this is very interesting, because I had, you know, from the Iranian side, I had on, you know, Professor Sayyid Mohammed Marandi, and from the U.S. I had people like Joe Kent, and they all mentioned what you said about Kuwait, that they could be taken over by Iraqi militias. And I also heard from Joe Kent that the Iraqis might also march across the border into the eastern parts of Syria if this destabilization continues and they see a necessity for this. In addition, Syria would have a problem with the Israelis and the Turks getting into a turf war. So how serious do you take not just the Kuwait issue, but what's happening in Syria? Because this is happening somewhat independent of the war with Iran, Yemen.

#Trita Parsi

It's linked, of course, but it's still—yeah, it's linked, but the linkage obviously is dramatically weaker today than it was five years ago, when the Iranians were present in Syria. First of all, most likely this war would not have happened had Assad not fallen, because the fall of Assad was one other major blow to Iran's deterrence that the Israelis used to say, this is the moment to attack. There's never been a better opportunity. But let's say that they had started that war under those circumstances. Well, then the counter-escalatory options would have also included Syria. But it has not, at least, been on the first or the second list of escalatory or counter-escalatory options that the Iranians have considered.

But this is what I pointed to earlier on, that we are now reaching a point in which the escalation may get out of control. And even countries in which the linkage is secondary or third-rate may actually be swept up by this instability and the failure to actually find de-escalation. And that could then bring Syria into it. I assume that it would not be a first option because, at a minimum, what the Iraqis would achieve with taking over a country like Kuwait, it would just completely overturn the apple cart when it comes to how the GCC has functioned for the last 40 or so years. And of course, Kuwait is oil-rich, et cetera. And, you know, the Iraqis—it's not just Saddam Hussein who have a claim on Kuwait.

So I find that far more likely, but also because taking over Kuwait may be an intermediate step towards overthrowing the government in Bahrain. Again, remember, when we had these conversations in the beginning of this war, I don't think any of us talked about these types of options or these types of scenarios. Now we are. And I think it tells you how far things have gone and in directions that very few expected. And if we extrapolate that further, we may be in scenarios that are completely different from those that we have been envisioning just in the last two weeks. And that is the element that I think is really dangerous, that this is no longer a calibrated, sophisticated, escalatory game that is being played between the U.S. and Iran, but one that actually neither side any longer controls.

#Glenn

Well, that's usually how these wars get out of control: the assumption of escalation control. At some point, that control goes away, and it spirals out of control. But in the beginning, you had people—well, Donald Trump, he was making the point that no one could have expected Iran to strike U.S. bases or shut down the Strait of Hormuz. I thought that would be on the top of the list. But early on, people started asking, well, when are the Houthis going to join in the game and perhaps shut down the Red Sea? And of course, this happened too. But what are the possible—because escalation in terms of targets, the energy infrastructure, is one thing—but the widening of the war by, for example, what we're seeing in Syria, what are other possibilities here besides Kuwait, Syria? Could you see a Jordanian or a Bahraini regime change? Yes.

#Trita Parsi

I don't know enough about the situation in Jordan or, frankly, Bahrain to be able to make an assessment as to whether they are really at risk. I would suspect that the Bahrainis are far more so than the Jordanians, although I think the situation in Jordan is also getting very tense. The population is clearly not happy about the manner in which—not only—the war has moved towards Jordan, but it's done so because Jordan has become Israel's first line of defense in the midst of an Israeli genocide against the Palestinians. And 50-plus percent of the Jordanian population are Palestinians. So the policy that the Jordanian government is pursuing is clearly not one that is well anchored in the population, and never will be.

But having said that, let me say, though, that I think Jordan is likely going to get more involved in this against their wishes for a couple of reasons. One, I think the Iranians right now are realizing that tensions with the GCC have gotten to a point that is quite detrimental. They don't want to create a scenario in which they cannot find some sort of a modus vivendi with the GCC states. There is a lot of anger right now, particularly after what the Houthis did, which, from the Saudi perspective, they see as part of an Iranian coordinated effort to strong-arm the Saudis and everyone else in the GCC to agree to Iran's terms on this trade.

And they find it completely unacceptable that, in the midst of negotiations, this happened. And again, it's because of the presumption that this was all planned and coordinated in that way. I'm not so sure it was, but I find it fully understandable that the Saudis would see it as such. But also, so that is going to push some of the Iranian strikes towards Jordan. It's also, of course, because they already destroyed so many of the U.S. bases. It's not worth just keeping on bombing things that are already bombed. But it's also because of the fact that, as I mentioned, Jordan has become Israel's first line of defense.

And if you expect that the Israelis are going to get into the war at some point, it lies in your interest to eliminate Jordan's capacity to shoot down Iranian missiles that are heading towards Israel. So I think all of those things are part of the reason why we're going to see the escalation move a little bit more towards Jordan. And it may also move towards Europe. I think the Iranians are looking now at where in the region outside of the GCC they can strike back at American targets. And that means that the geography of this war may shift quite dramatically in the future if the war continues. Again, unfortunately, that's my baseline prediction, that it will. And again, it's one other element of how this is evolving in directions that very few people expected at first.

#Glenn

But the involvement of Europe, though, that would be—again, if I was Iranian, I would think the same. That is, you know, you want to take out the U.S. bases in the region, make them, you know, go all the way to Diego Garcia or even further, Thailand, to be able to refuel and replenish. But striking U.S.-based assets in Europe, which are being used in the war against Iran, it would be a nice, not just a deterrent effect, but also disrupting its logistics.

The cost, however... Again, if I was sitting in Tehran, it would be to pull Europe into this war because the Europeans seem, as I said before, well, there's a lot of uncertainty. So if they can make NATO seem valuable, many would jump on this wagon right away, because if something would be struck in Europe and they did nothing, Trump would essentially declare NATO dead. And if they did something, this could be something that could maybe get more U.S. commitment in the war against Russia. So how do you see the possibility of Europe being involved in this?

#Trita Parsi

I think you're absolutely right that, you know, the evolution of events as you described it may very well end up being like that: that the Iranian strike at some European territory in which there's a U.S. base, or a base that allows the U.S. to use it to attack Iran, and that this will force a European response, and then suddenly NATO is involved in this in a manner that it wasn't before. It raises, it increases Trump's appreciation for Europe within NATO, and NATO itself, and that all of this, in some ways, at least in that limited manner, would be seen as positive by the Europeans. That, however, does not necessarily mean that the United States is going to do what the Europeans want on Ukraine.

And if anything should be clear to the Europeans, it is that it doesn't matter if you give Trump what he wants. It does not mean in the slightest that he's going to reciprocate in the manner that you hope. So it could end up that way, but I can also see it ending up in a manner in which, at the end of the day, Europeans are going to find themselves in a conflict with Iran without having the American protection against Russia or for Ukraine in the manner that they had hoped. I remember I spoke to the Iranian side about this issue, and I raised the issue that, you know, back then they were making very explicit threats against bases in Bulgaria that the Bulgarian government and parliament had decided would be given to the U.S. to use for a war with Iran. And the Iranians made very clear threats that they would strike those bases there.

It prompted a lot of anger and opposition within Bulgaria. And the people living in those villages nearby did not want to see anything that would bring that war to their territory. And I asked Iranians that, you know, at the end of the day, if you strike Europe, this is NATO territory. You're going to bring NATO into this war. And the answer was, well, the U.S. is also part of NATO. So from their perspective, they're already at war with NATO. The position of France, Germany, and the U.K. was certainly not the position of France and Germany in 2003, when the United States started the illegal war against Iraq. On the contrary, even though the Brits did not actually join in in the manner that the U.S. wanted with Diego Garcia, nevertheless, the statements, etc., are quite shameful in terms of how they are giving a degree of legitimacy and support for this war.

So I don't think the Iranian side—I mean, they're very explicit that they believe that they're already at war with NATO. It doesn't mean that the Europeans couldn't get much more involved in this compared to what they are today. But I think on the Iranian side, you also have now a degree of confidence in their own capabilities that simply did not exist in the beginning of the war because they had planned for more than 30 years for a potential war with the U.S. based on an American

attack on Iran. They had never exercised it. They had exercised things in Iraq, in Syria, et cetera, but never actually directly against the United States. It was not clear to them how well they would fare. Now they believe that they have outperformed their own expectations.

Their confidence in this is much higher than it was before. And their confidence may be exaggerated. Perhaps they're overconfident and, as a result, will end up accepting risks that they shouldn't be accepting. But we are in a situation in which this will continue to escalate by itself unless there is a concerted and deliberate effort to de-escalate. And that is going to have to be an effort that brings in the U.S. and Iran, not just the regional states. It's very important what they're doing, but it's not sufficient. And as a result, again, despite how terrible these scenarios are and how bad they would be for everyone, they are more likely than not happening because of the trajectory that we're on and the absence of real efforts to change that trajectory.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, that's a good point. The hubris which exists possibly now on both sides is quite dangerous. But as you say this, I keep wondering, not just the region being disintegrated and all these conflicts being interlinked, but even the possibility of this war merging more with the current war we have in Europe. It's starting to look like a world war scenario. What I mean is, if Europe gets pulled into this war against Iran, if I was in Russia, I wouldn't want Iran to be defeated, first of all, because that would be devastating for their own security.

But indeed, given that the Europeans and Americans have been attacking Russian territory with their drones and missiles for so many years now, you know, wouldn't the Russians have a great incentive to not necessarily send hypersonic missiles and a list of targets? But, you know, the West has been attacking Russia through Ukraine for years now. Wouldn't the Russians have the same, let's say, opportunity with Iran? Not just a petty, you know, retaliation, but... But the Europeans are talking very openly about war now with Russia. Wouldn't it be a good move, I say cautiously, to be able to use a third state to attack the Europeans?

#Glenn

Again, it seems far-fetched, but if you see how everything's unraveling, it's... absolutely.

#Trita Parsi

Yeah, no, it's very sad. This is not a conversation I think you or I actually want to be part of, but this is just a reality that we're dealing with. Everything is unraveling, and as a result, nightmare scenarios that were not considered at all five weeks ago are now, unfortunately, things that we do have to address. And I think, in that scenario that you're describing, I do find that a plausible outcome, that it's a way for the Russians now to directly attack Europe and avoid that type of direct entanglement. But if the Iranians are already on their own attacking Europe because of the Europeans allowing U.S.

military to use their bases, or American bases there, to attack Iran, I mean, there are attacks taking place against Iran going out of these bases, U.S. bases in Germany, and they were throughout this entire war.

To the best of my understanding, the Iranians do not yet have the capability of accurately reaching those bases. And perhaps there are other considerations, of course, that are causing them not to go for that. But another reason is, of course, if there are other bases that are being used that are much closer, those are the ones you're going to target first. But as many of those bases are no longer operable, and as more and more countries are not allowing the United States to use their territory to attack Iran, then you might end up seeing that some of the bases in Europe, including in Germany, will become on a short list of targets. I certainly hope that we don't end up in this scenario in any way, shape, or form, because again, this is part of that uncontrollable thing.

It's so difficult to predict what will happen after that, because this is so unthinkable and something that was really deemed beyond far-fetched just a couple of weeks ago. But I fear, unfortunately, that this is the trajectory that we're on right now, and I'm not seeing the type of effort. I think we talked about it a little bit last time, that one entity that actually could step in, because the Europeans can't do much on the Iran file. The Europeans destroyed their own credibility and their own seat at the table on the Iran file because of the decision to trigger snapback, which was a decision that also paved the way for this war to happen. And this is a decision that many Europeans at the time were very unhappy about, that the E3 had made, and the E3 had made it by and large without any meaningful consultations with the rest of the EU. And the rest of the EU was paying the price for that decision.

But since then, the Europeans have really not had any major diplomatic role in this. And neither the Arab side, the U.S. side, nor the Iranian side have any interest in bringing them in. And I want to emphasize, it includes the Arab side. They don't see what the value is of the Europeans in this context. But given all of that, the one entity that potentially may change its position and step in diplomatically is China. China does have leverage over the U.S., does have leverage over Iran, but it also has an instinct that has served it very well, which is: stay out of these things. Don't get involved in other countries' problems and wars. You certainly don't want to do anything that gets you so involved that you get ownership of a conflict that you had nothing to do with in terms of starting.

And that is what has guided China in most cases, but also in this case up until now. And I'm not saying that they're changing right now. But I do fear that if this level of escalation that we're talking about actually comes to fruition, including the implications for the global economy in terms of energy infrastructure, et cetera, being struck, that the cost of staying out may be higher than the cost of trying diplomatically to put an end to this out of China's own self-interest, not out of a desire to discredit the U.S., not out of a desire to end up becoming a political or military guarantor for the region, none of those things, but out of the self-interest of putting an end, or at least a lid, on this escalation because of how dangerous it is.

I'm not saying that we're there in any way, shape, or form. I've had conversations with the Chinese, and their answer essentially is that if the U.S. and Iran ask them, they will be happy to enter into some mediation role. But obviously, the U.S. is very unlikely to ask that. But I do wonder if a scenario emerges in which the Iranians and the GCC ask for Chinese mediation, and the Chinese may decide that that is sufficient of an opening for them to enter. But I think it's going to be very—I don't think the Chinese will be doing this in any way, shape, or form happily. They are much, much happier staying out of this. That has served them tremendously well. And it would have served the U.S. tremendously well if they had just a little bit of that Chinese attitude towards the rest of the world.

#Glenn

It would fit within a wider strategy by the Chinese, because it seems like ever since the global financial crisis, they had looked at the danger of the U.S.-led international economic system slowly deteriorating. They want to create an alternative, which is why they're developing this parallel economic architecture. But now that we see these wars, especially the Iran war, contributing so much to the meltdown of energy supplies, also the freedom of navigation around the world, from Cuba to Europe all the way to the Middle East, it's all coming under a lot of stress, which the Chinese are reliant on. But yeah, no, as you said, I don't think they would get involved without an invitation, probably from both sides.

I did have a question about Israel because, well, obviously they're a key component here. They're the one who also started a lot of this mess back in June of last year by attacking Iran. But we hear from Israel now that the IDF—the head of the IDF—said a while ago that the Israeli army is already overstretched. The war, or if you can call it a war, what's being done against Gaza still continues. We see this week that the Israelis carried out strikes, artillery fire against southern Lebanon. They're also quite involved in Syria, where they're worried about Turkey. And do you think, you know, given that they're involved in all of these wars at the same time, they've taken a lot of punishment in the previous rounds of this war, if the U.S. decides to go in now against Yemen or Iran or both, what role do you think they would play, or is it too much for them now?

#Trita Parsi

Sorry, I didn't hear the last part.

#Glenn

Are they too overstretched, or do you think there's a role for Israel to join in on another round of war escalation against Iran? Yeah.

#Trita Parsi

Yeah. No, I do think that the Israelis are absolutely overstretched. I don't think that will be a factor that will prevent them from seeking further escalation and being involved. They wanted to be involved in the second round of the war. It was the United States that kept them out. It was mainly because the U.S. didn't trust that the Israelis would stick to the level of escalation that the U.S. favored at the time and that they thought they could manage. If you remember, in the first round, many of the things that really caused great escalation were conducted by the Israelis. It was the Israelis that struck the desalination plant in Kish.

They were hoping that the Iranians would retaliate against desalination plants in the GCC. It was the Israelis that struck at all the refineries in Tehran. If I'm not mistaken, that's what led to the—was that what led to the attacks on the gas fields in Qatar? It may have been something else, but nevertheless, the Israelis were constantly going beyond what the Trump administration wanted because the Israelis wanted the Iranians to escalate even further in order to essentially push the GCC closer to the Israelis. Because the U.S. did not trust that the Israelis would play ball or be within the framework that the U.S. wanted, they kept them out.

But I think the Israelis, if they find an opportunity, are definitely going to go for this escalation. Whether they are ready or not, whether they are overstretched, et cetera, those are issues that, at the end of the day, I think they will deal with secondarily. They see, I think, right now that with Trump, particularly after the midterms, in which he has less political constraints, that's the last two years in which they will have a president in the White House that will be deferential to Israel, that will take a lot of Israel's advice, and will keep them at the table. And I think they will try to do everything they can to take advantage of that.

I think the Israeli calculation is that after this election, after the presidential election in 2028, there is a high likelihood—not uncertainty, but a high likelihood—that the president, whether Republican or Democrat, but more likely if Democrat, will simply not continue the U.S.-Israel relationship in the same manner. I'm not saying a major break. I'm not saying that they're going to turn Israel into an enemy, et cetera. But the manner in which Israel could push the United States into wars, I don't think it's going to be the same after 2028. And as a result, they're going to take advantage of the next two years as much as they can, even if they're overstretched.

#Glenn

Well, just—well, last question, returning to where we began with Saudi Arabia, because they seem to be a key actor involved in all of these things. What are essentially their options now? Because they have, obviously, if there's a massive new round of attack coming against Iran, you know, what role would they have? They're uncertain about the U.S. involvement. They would like to cut a deal. Again, I'm not sure what the deal would look like. But, you know, you can then add Yemen on top of

the whole thing, which they seem to have painted themselves into a corner. I'm not sure how they're supposed to exit this war. So, I mean, you know, if we put ourselves in Riyadh, you know, what are they discussing here? What are their options and strategic thinking, you know?

#Trita Parsi

I think their options are all terrible from their standpoint. I think one of the options the U.S. has put in front of them is, okay, we'll help you against the Houthis, but you're going to have to open up your airspace and your bases for attacks on Iran, which essentially means we'll help you against the Houthis so you don't have to deal with that war, but instead you're going to have to deal with a direct war with Iran, which clearly is not a particularly attractive option to the Saudis. So I think they're in a very, very bad situation, one that is to a large part of their own making because they're the ones who decided to strike at the airport in Sana'a.

And I think there is one other option that they may be currently talking to the Iranians about. I don't know. I'm speculating here. It's not an attractive option to them, but perhaps one that they now are forced to take, that is the least unattractive option, which is that they agree to lift the blockade on Yemen, and by that end the campaign by the Houthis against Saudi Arabia. They will have lost Yemen by and large, but they may no longer be at war with the Houthis. Will that be sustainable, stable?

Of course, those are different questions, but compared to some of the other options, it may be something that they are willing to consider in these circumstances, particularly mindful of the fact that even if Trump agrees to join the war, given what The New York Times has reported, what I've heard myself, which is that he's just been going back and forth between agreeing to disagreeing, you have to be very nervous if you're sitting in Riyadh, even if he agrees to join the war, because you have no idea for how long he will, and if he will just pull the plug on it without even consulting you and get out of that war when he feels like it, and it can leave Saudi Arabia in an even worse situation.

#Glenn

I was going to say, if he wants to unload the war on someone, this will be the way the U.S. pulls out, and this could be a bit of a trap for the Saudis. Sorry, just one last thought. Yemen, where are they going, the Houthis, here? Because, again, it's hard to understand what's happening and what their options are. Do you think they're going to go for taking control of all of Yemen, or will they move into Saudi Arabia? What is the thinking here?

#Trita Parsi

I have to admit, I'm not an expert on Yemen, so I wouldn't be able to give you an informed answer. I know Shireen Al-Adeimi at Quincy would be a much better person to ask that question. But let me

just say this, having first contradicted myself now by adding one thought. I don't know about the rest of Yemen, but I do believe entering into Saudi territory may be something that they will do, and at least moving more of the war into Saudi territory. Now, that, of course, may put additional pressure on Turkey and Pakistan to do more to help the government in Riyadh.

And certainly, the rhetoric on the Turkish and Pakistani side has really become much, much more hawkish against the Houthis, calling them terrorists, et cetera, et cetera. There's a very strong sectarian dimension to it, not necessarily from the government side, but nevertheless that is coming out of Turkey and Pakistan on this at this point. But one constraint those countries are going to face, beyond the fact that no one in their right mind would intervene in Yemen anyway, is the fact that the Houthis right now are extremely popular in the Muslim world and in the Arab world because of the fact that they have stood against both the U.S. and Israel and done so despite having no support from any major superpowers, obviously.

They have a relationship, a very important one, with Iran, but they're not a proxy of Iran in any way, shape, or form, which is also part of the reason why it's easier for them to be more popular in the Arab world, because the distance between the Houthis and Tehran is seen by a lot of people in the Arab world. And I think it would just be an absolutely impossible position for the Turks, who right now are very concerned about what the Israelis will do against them and the tensions that they have with Israel in Syria, if they simultaneously end up having an actual conflict with the Houthis while the Houthis are actually striking at Israel.

#Glenn

Well, as I said before, this has the potential to get very complicated very fast. So I hope to put some faith in the regional diplomacy. Hopefully something will begin to work out there, because I don't see any great scenario for any of these countries. Anyways, thank you so much for your insights. Thank you so much.

#Trita Parsi

I really appreciate it. Again, people, go check out your Substack. That's at least where I go for my news on the Middle East.

#Trita Parsi

So thanks a lot. Thank you so much for having me.