

Iran & Russia FLIP Trump's War Ultimatum into STUNNING Victory | Mercouris

Alexander Mercouris of The Duran joined the show to discuss the bunker buster bombshell dropped by Iran and how both reverse engineering of this weapon and the conflict between the surging Iran-Russia partnership and the Trump administration has already led to massive losses set to get worse.

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#Danny

Abbas Araqchi, the foreign minister of Iran, hinted that there were security concerns about the IAEA inspecting Fordow and other nuclear sites because of unexploded ordnance. That sparked a lot of speculation about whether Iran now had access to bunker busters that might not have caused the damage they were expected to cause, as well as Tomahawk missiles that were also fired at these nuclear sites. Some have speculated about possible reverse engineering and Russia-Iran cooperation on that. It's assumed that the more kinetic a conflict between Iran and the United States becomes, the more something like this is not only possible but also places the U.S. at further risk—let alone all the other risks we could list.

#Mercouris

Well, of course, the first thing to say is we don't really know how much damage these American strikes on Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan last June really did. The Iranians have played all kinds of complex word games around this. I mean, sometimes they've hinted that the damage wasn't so great; other times they've said, well, actually, it probably was. They've been deliberately ambiguous about this, and also about the state of their nuclear program. They've played a very complex game with the IAEA itself. They were fully cooperating with the IAEA up to the June war, and I think this is an important thing to understand. Iran agreed, as part of the JCPOA—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—reached with the Obama administration and the Europeans back in 2015, to put its nuclear sites under inspection. And it's widely accepted that it complied with that promise.

So the IAEA inspectors were going into all of these sites and monitoring them. After the June war, the Iranians said it had been a terrible mistake on their part to cooperate with the IAEA inspectors to the extent that they had. They claimed the inspectors were actually cooperating with the Americans and the Israelis—that they provided them with targeting data about these facilities, enabling the

Americans and Israelis to perfect their attacks on these centers. They also said the inspectors identified all the relevant scientists, which set those scientists up for potential assassination. For a long time after the June war, Iran said it was not prepared to cooperate any further with the IAEA. Then, a short time ago, they said they would cooperate after all. And this is part of the current crisis.

And of course, the IAEA inspectors can come and look around. But now they're saying, well, maybe you actually can't look at everything, because who knows—there might be unexploded ordnance there, unexploded bombs left over from the war in June. We can't tell you for sure, and you might not be safe. So it seems to me this is part of the game, the war of nerves, that the Iranians and the Americans are playing with each other. Each side is playing these psychological games. There may indeed be all kinds of possibilities.

I'm sure, by the way, that the Chinese and the Russians have been all over the Fordow facility. They've been trying to find out as much as they can about the American bunker-buster bombs and all of that. No doubt all that information has been relayed to Moscow and China, and their scientists are working on it. But I think the other point you made—what you were touching on—is a serious one, which is that, putting all these speculations about what's actually in these facilities aside, if we do find ourselves in a long war, a long war that might create major problems for the United States and for Israel, the potential for greater escalation is very much there.

The Americans and the Israelis might feel that they can't simply agree to whatever demands Iran is making. It would be humiliating for them and would destroy their position in the Middle East. So that might cause them to escalate in incredibly dangerous ways. And of course, on the other side, if the Iranians really feel their backs are to the wall, they might also escalate in ways we can't imagine. I don't believe that Iran has a nuclear weapons capability—definitely not present, or even proximate. I think if Iran set itself the task of developing a nuclear weapon, it would probably still take years before it appeared, for straightforward technological and engineering reasons. The United States and Israel are both nuclear powers.

#Danny

As these escalations have been happening, Russia said it would not stand idly by in this U.S.-Iran war that's escalating. What does that mean to you, Alexander, from the Russian perspective today? Given everything we've talked about—how Russia is already cooperating with Iran, but also how it approaches these kinds of matters—especially considering that this war could, unfortunately, have regional implications that spread to Russia.

#Mercouris

Right. For the Russians, this is a short-term nightmare and a long-term opportunity, depending on how things play out. In the short term, they absolutely do not want an American attack on Iran. For them, this would be massively destabilizing and extremely dangerous. They probably know a lot

about the internal situation in Iran, but there must always be worries in Moscow that the government there might not be stable. And they obviously do not want that government to fall. It would be bad enough if it were replaced by a pro-American government. But if the government fell and there was an even deeper crisis—if Iran fractured and there were conflicts within the country—that would be a huge issue for Russia, because Iran is not that far from them.

It's close to the former Soviet Central Asia. The one thing that horrifies the Russians is the possibility of long-term instability in regions near their borders. So the Russians are going to do everything they can to support diplomatic efforts to avoid war. They've apparently made all kinds of proposals. They've suggested that Rosatom, the Russian nuclear power monopoly, come in to inspect the Iranian facilities and take over enrichment in Iran. There have also been proposals—not just from the Russians—for some kind of consortium to take over the enrichment process in Iran. So they're doing what they can to prevent a conflict.

And they've told us that in December they brokered an agreement between Israel and Iran, whereby Israel agreed it would not attack Iran, and Iran agreed it would not attack Israel, provided the other side did not attack first. So they're trying, I think sincerely and genuinely, to avoid a war. If a war comes, the calculus starts to change. And here we come back to the question of Iranian resilience, because if Iran is able to hold together and absorb the blow, then, as we've just discussed, Iran becomes more dependent on its friends—on Russia and China. And that gives Russia and China potential leverage over Iran, but it also gives Russia and China potential leverage over the United States.

And there's a recent example of how that played out, and it's one I'm sure, Danny, you're very familiar with—Vietnam, the Vietnam conflict—which is exactly what happened there. Both the Chinese and the Russians backed North Vietnam against the United States. They did gain a lot of leverage over North Vietnam, but they also used that leverage, and the leverage they had over the United States, to get the U.S. to make substantive concessions to them. So this was the golden era of détente between the Soviet Union and the United States, the period when the U.S. opened up to China and when Nixon and Kissinger went to Beijing.

#Danny

When we think about Iran—the technological advances it's made on the military front in particular—versus the Vietnam situation, it opens up many more elements to that kind of comparison. I don't know if it's possible. The U.S. is in a much different position, as you know, Alexander. The Trump administration—well, forget Trump—like every administration since the Vietnam era, especially in the last two decades or so, it's hard to imagine them scrambling to try to get concessions from Russia or China at this point.

But nonetheless, I think it's interesting to note how Russia would approach Iran in this way, given that this is a real disaster in the making. And it's not just Iran-centered—and I think that's a big

point I wanted to make in this conversation today—that Russia and, of course, China, in large part, are heavily involved in the calculations around Iran. Any comments you want to make on this? Because Iran is often looked at in a silo. Like, look at the U.S. and the neocons in the Middle East—look at that big, bad country that's funding proxies, has all these missiles. But Russia and China are right there in the calculations.

#Mercouris

Well, of course they are—absolutely they are. I think the important thing to say about Iran is that, yes, it does have allies, regional allies. It's a major power in the Middle East with a very long history there. It has co-religionists everywhere—the Shia communities in Iraq, Lebanon, and, well, I don't know whether the Houthis are exactly Shia, but anyway, they're people who, doctrinally, shall we say, have closer connections to Iran. It's not surprising that Iran has regional friends. And yes, all of these countries, all of these communities, have militias. But we're talking about a fractured region where there are lots of militias.

You would expect to see militias in all of these places. And if they're Shia militias, then inevitably they're going to look to Iran. Iran itself, until 2024, never launched a single missile against Israel and avoided, to the extent that it could, any open conflict with the United States. I don't myself see Iran as an aggressive power. Yes, they've been involved in all sorts of covert activities—you could call them, if you wish, terrorist activities—but every Middle Eastern state, including Israel, has been involved in similar kinds of operations. I don't see that Iran has done this to a greater extent than any other state in the region. I do not see it as an aggressive country.

I see this enormous buildup and these threats against Iran as coming from aggressive countries. And I do not see Iran as posing a threat to the stability of the Middle East. The threat to the stability of the Middle East, and the pressure toward war, comes from Israel and from the United States. Now, as for the Russians and the Chinese, as I said, they do not want war. This is, as I said, potentially a disaster for them. But of course, they'll be calculating their plans. People who do calculations—they showed in the 1960s how it can work for them—and they have a habit, a way, in these sorts of conflicts, of in the end coming out on top, because they calculate in some ways more thoroughly and more carefully than the Americans do.

#Danny

Yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, Iran has said quite clearly—and what's so interesting about that is the claims made about Iran sponsoring terrorism. Funny thing is, Iran never even hides that they support Palestinian armed resistance or Ansar Allah. They say these groups aren't their proxies, but they don't hide that they provide support to them—Hezbollah, etc. It's not a secret. It's interesting because, I guess, one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. You have Israel, Saudi Arabia,

and Qatar providing direct aid to jihadists, takfiris, and all those kinds of elements. It's certainly an interesting setup around this debate. But I want to ask you now, how much of a disaster is this for Donald Trump?

Because the Trump administration has really come to this point where Iran is saying there's going to be a regional war if the U.S. attacks. And the Trump administration has been building up militarily as much as it can—air defenses for its so-called allies, and of course the so-called armada. But two delayed strikes, Alexander—that says something, in my assessment. What does it say to you? Because right now we're in this, I guess, holding pattern where the risk is very high, but obviously there are considerations being made. Netanyahu is going to run to Washington for the three-thousandth time. Yeah. What do you make of the disaster this could be for Trump? Or is this all part of the big plan that some people have said is part of Trump's calculations?

#Mercouris

Well, to say straight away, I don't think Trump is capable of formulating any great plans. And I think one should put aside the idea that there's some grand strategy behind all of this. I think Donald Trump has a basic lack of understanding of the Middle East and of Iran itself. He assumes—and has been told by far too many people—that the government in Iran is very precarious, that Iran is a house of cards, and that if he blows hard enough, that house of cards will fall. Then he can simply move in, take over its oil and natural resources, install whoever he thinks should be the leader of Iran, make Iran an American ally or satellite, and all would be very, very easy.

And I think if we go back to the June war, the Israelis told him they'd be able to carry out this decapitation strike on the first day—that they were going to kill all the major Iranian leaders, the Ayatollah, the president, all the top officials. All he needed to do was sit back, it would be easy, it would go smoothly, and he didn't need to worry. So I think this is what Trump has been told, and I think for a long time he's believed it. I don't think Trump likes Iran at all. I think he's accepted all the usual things, the usual stories about Iran that circulate every day in the Western media. And I think he believes it would be a great victory, a wonderful win for him, if he could be the man who overthrew the government of Iran and achieved the outcome that he set out for.

Now, the trouble is, I think he's starting to understand that this whole situation might be a lot more complicated than he realized—that Iran is a more complex society than he thought, that the country is very big, the population is very large, and the government actually does have a critical mass of support. There are many unhappy people in Iran; the economic situation is not good. But nonetheless, there's still a significant part of Iranian society that supports the current government, if only for religious reasons. And Iran's military is not to be disregarded, and the other great powers—China and Russia—because of Iran's size and its regional importance, can't simply ignore what the United States is doing there.

And this explains all the hesitation and uncertainty, because Trump doesn't want a long war. But having reached this point, he can't easily back off. If he does, he'll lose face. Some of his donors will be unhappy. His friend Netanyahu will be unhappy. All the various people in the United States who've been worked up to seek this war will be unhappy, and he'll be criticized. The reality is that if there is a war—unless it succeeds in exactly the way he wants—if it's a long war, it's going to destroy him. Just as Vietnam destroyed Lyndon Johnson, just as Johnson's Great Society program basically never succeeded because of Vietnam. So whatever complicated, incoherent economic plans Donald Trump has with tariffs, whatever they are, all of that will fail if he finds himself in a long war in the Middle East with Iran.

#Danny

Yeah, it would be far worse than what happened after George W. Bush. You know, the Republican Party was never really the same after that. And hence, Donald Trump is now the archetypal leader of the Republican Party. That wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for the wars that Trump used to say we shouldn't be spending trillions of dollars on—shouldn't be doing Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., etc. But I definitely want to get to Ukraine soon. I just wanted to ask your final comments on this—if I can actually remember what I wanted to ask—with regard to the crisis this could cause for Trump.

He seems to believe—or at least, I don't think it's just him. I believe there are people on his team, some parts of his cabinet, whoever it is. They have this kind of obsession with the idea of a quick strike, like, "We're going to hit fast, and then everything will go our way." That seems to be the model the Trump administration wants to impose wherever it's trying to exert influence and dominance. Are we even in that era anymore, though? Or has that era ever really existed, Alexander? Because I just don't see, when we look at the chessboard or the geopolitical landscape, that that's really possible. And if it's not possible, then why even consider it?

#Mercouris

Well, this is how the United States actually tends to wage wars, or at least has waged wars since Vietnam. Vietnam was America's last long war, and it ended disastrously. The United States hasn't wanted to stop waging war since then. It's fought many wars, in fact, but it always tries to fight them quickly—to have them over with quickly, to achieve its political objectives as fast as possible—because it knows it really isn't in a position, as a society or even as an economy, to sustain a long war. The problem is, even if you appear to win a short war, what the Americans repeatedly discover is that whatever they achieve is ephemeral. The other side isn't really defeated.

And it comes back. I mean, we saw that in Afghanistan. We've seen that in Iraq. We've probably seen it in other places. I would argue the Balkans—the Yugoslav wars, which have never really resolved themselves—are another example of this. So this is probably not the way to conduct war or to conduct foreign policy. In the case of an adversary like Iran, and before that Vietnam, thinking

you can achieve a quick knockout blow places too much reliance on what you believe your enemy's weaknesses to be. If those weaknesses aren't there—if your enemy isn't prepared to fight your war in the way you want it to—then of course you're going to be in serious trouble.

#Danny

Yeah, it raises the question, you know—trying to figure out the right way of waging war. It raises the question: why are you going on an offensive war in the first place? And can those objectives even be met without the absolute carnage, the crises, and the chaos that these wars produce? The answer is always no, but nonetheless, here we are. These neocons and their power brokers—the money—they can't stop. We're going to have to keep on observing this, Alexander. They don't even have a force the U.S. likes to install, even if it's chaos, even if it's the Taliban during Afghanistan.

They don't care who it is, but they usually have a force—or forces—that they say, "Okay, you can take over and do our bidding, maybe, if you're willing to." They don't even have that in Iran at all. I mean, there's no observable force. And of course, we saw what happened during those so-called protests or riots. Those forces were not politically capable, no matter how well-armed they were, of causing enough damage to do anything other than what happened—which is that they got silenced. Well, you're right in all you've said.

#Mercouris

I mean, it often seems to me that, you know, the Romans—it was once said of them that they create a desert and call it peace. That was a criticism of Roman imperialism made at the time of the Roman Empire by the historian Tacitus. It seems to me that the Americans create chaos and call it freedom, because that's how these interventions generally turn out. I mean, we don't actually get stable governments or structures, but they're always promoted. We see this with the Iranian protests—they're always promoted as coming to the rescue of people who need, desire, and hanker for freedom. But the result is mostly chaos.