

Chas Freeman: The War Against Iran Could Destroy the U.S. Republic

Ambassador Chas Freeman discusses the US attack on Iran. In a war of attrition, Iran could outlast the US and the crisis from a lack of victory could destroy the US republic. Ambassador Freeman was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> 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>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We're joined by Chas Freeman, a former diplomat and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and, very relevant to today's discussion, the former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Thank you for taking the time—it's great to see you again.

#Chas Freeman

Glad to be back with you. A lot is happening, and we don't know a great deal about what's happening, because we have military censorship in Israel again, which means reporting from there is unreliable. And, of course, the Internet is shut down in Iran, and we don't know the damage that's been done at the various U.S. bases that were struck, although we're told there are no casualties. Whether that's still true or not, I don't know.

#Glenn

From your perspective, when you look at the overall picture, what are the strategic objectives the United States is trying to achieve with this attack?

#Chas Freeman

Well, the United States has a laundry list of objectives. Which one is at the top of the list depends on how the laundry is sorted from day to day. But overall, I'd say that question is irrelevant. The real question is, what are Israel's strategic objectives? Because they have determined this war. We now

know from an Israeli source that the timing of the fighting was, in fact, agreed upon—the time of the attack was set for December 29th at Mar-a-Lago—which supports the conclusion that the negotiations conducted by Witkoff and Kushner with the Iranians were another deception intended to string things out. Israel's objective is clear, and President Trump has obviously embraced it: to remove Iran from the geopolitical chessboard in West Asia, and to do that by eliminating the Islamic Republic—the regime, if you will—starting by murdering its leaders.

The Israelis are now claiming they have confirmation that they killed Ayatollah Khamenei, that his body was found in the rubble of his compound. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but I suspect it's very plausible. This has all sorts of implications. If I may just jump ahead to those—because there are a lot of other implications here—for one thing, Iran has a well-established constitutional succession mechanism. Presumably, that will now go into effect. Ayatollah Khamenei has been a vociferous opponent, apparently, of building a nuclear weapon for Iran. His removal will strengthen the hands of many in Iran who see that following North Korea's example is the only effective way to assure the integrity of the state.

That is, maximum pressure in the case of North Korea had as its principal result the development of an ICBM with a nuclear warhead—or actually, multiple nuclear warheads—aimed at the continental United States. So that is one set of consequences we may now expect. In other words, if the objective, or one of the many objectives in this attack, was—as has been stated—to finally eliminate the Iranian nuclear program, it's likely to have exactly the opposite effect. The second major implication is this: there were statements from Hezbollah before this war began, or before this phase of the war began—because the war has been ongoing, just at a low intensity up to now. They said that if the Supreme Leader in Iran were murdered, they would enter the fracas.

The Israelis are obviously very concerned about this because they've called up reserves to reinforce the border with Lebanon, fearing a repetition of something like October 7th. So those are the immediate implications. There are others. Of course, the people being attacked—or rather, the equipment or the bases being attacked—in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, though not in Oman or Saudi Arabia apparently, are American. They're not local. There's no indication that any Kuwaitis, Bahrainis, Qataris, or Emiratis have been killed, as far as I know. I suspect that eventually they won't be immune from these attacks, but at the moment those attacks are focused not on them, but on the bases the United States has been permitted to establish on their territory. And therefore, they face a dilemma.

On the one hand, they were moving toward a sort of informal coalition with Iran to counter Israel. On the other hand, the Israeli and American action has resulted in violations of their sovereignty. You know, of course, Israel violated Qatar's sovereignty earlier—in June—but this is no doubt a dilemma for them. What do they do? They can't really endorse an attack on Iran that includes an attack on themselves. They can't ignore the attack on themselves and thereby excuse the Iranian

retaliation. So I think this will be interesting to watch. I don't know what the reaction will be. The main point, however, Glenn, is that we're told that if the plan of attack was approved on December 29, the original date for it to take place was February 20.

There are reports that Russian intelligence managed to acquire the entire battle plan and hand it to the Iranians, and that the United States became aware of it—or Israel became aware of it and passed that information to the United States—and that therefore the attack was postponed. I've felt from the beginning, and I believe I said so about a week and a half ago in a discussion with you, that the negotiations were a fraud, that they had no serious purpose, that the terms being demanded were out of line with any reasonable expectation of an Iranian response, and that therefore an attack was almost inevitable. We've now seen that that is the case.

And this has caused, I think, a real constitutional awakening in the United States because, in a sense, a president who launches an attack of this magnitude on another country without even informing Congress until the very last moment, and without going through the constitutionally mandated process of debating the issue in Congress and obtaining a legislative decision to back the war—well, that's a serious breach. And not only does he do that, but about 75% of Americans, depending on the poll you look at, have been opposed to this war. So it's not only a constitutional violation; it's a dictatorial act at odds with entrenched public opinion.

So we'll see, as the week goes on, whether any of the invertebrate people who inhabit Congress will be able to grow a backbone and reassert any aspect of their constitutional authority. We have mixed reactions, of course. The loyalists—the loyal Trumpists—are all behind this. And those who are skeptical about Trump, even within the Republican Party, now take a different view. Interestingly, perhaps the strongest condemnation of the attack came from Donald Trump's former cheerleader, Marjorie Taylor Greene. But there have been other voices on the Republican side that seem to recognize that if this is not corrected, it marks the end of the American republic and its constitutional aspirations.

It could be this serious for the United States. Indeed. Well, there are levels of seriousness. We know, for example, that whoever prevails in this war—which is not going to be over in a few days, but has aspects of a war of attrition—the United States is going to expend a great part of its arsenal, already depleted through the defense of Ukraine in an earlier period and, more recently, the defense of Israel. So the ability of the United States to respond to other challenges, whether in Europe or the Asia-Pacific, is greatly diminished no matter what happens. And, of course, if some of the estimates of Iranian capabilities are, in fact, correct...

It's not at all certain that the United States will prevail, and a defeat on this level would be enormously discrediting—not only to Donald Trump, who bears sole responsibility for this attack. Having decided that Netanyahu was a better source of authority than the U.S. Congress or the

Constitution, he's now out on a limb. But for the United States, this would be a humiliation. It would devalue the reputation of the American military considerably. So I don't see anything particularly good coming out of this for anybody—and I include in that my own country, the United States.

#Glenn

But you are the former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. So when the United States attacked Iran today and the Iranian retaliation followed, it seemed to focus very heavily on the Gulf states. Or maybe that's just where we're getting information from, because we can see the attacks coming from Iran—Dubai and all across the region. What do you think the consequences of this will be? Will some of these small kingdoms fall?

#Chas Freeman

No, I don't think so. I think they're all very nicely entrenched. Some of them depend on Israeli surveillance technology—police state technology—to stay in power. I think they have a political problem. They certainly can't be pro-Israeli. They can't support the United States. They can't endorse Iran. They're in a hard place politically. But, you know, they have a longstanding habit of differentiating their rhetoric from their actions. And they're very risk-averse, very cautious.

The exception is the UAE. The others are notoriously cautious. We've had a reaction from the Saudis strongly condemning the Iranian attack on fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. But as far as I know, there have been American air attacks moved to Prince Sultan Air Base, south of Riyadh, at Al-Qaraj. I don't see any reaction from the Iranians to that, so I have to assume there's some kind of effective communication going on between Riyadh and Tehran.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, given that you see the U.S.—the republic—at stake here, what other long-term impacts do you think this could have on U.S. interests?

#Chas Freeman

Well, a lot of it depends on how it turns out. In a sense, as we discussed about a week and a half ago, there are elements of Sino-American competition involved here, and also American competition with Russia. There are Russian and Chinese defensive weapons systems going up against American offensive systems. One of the consequences could be that the U.S. reputation for leadership in high-tech weaponry is either strengthened or tarnished. And we don't know yet. In fact, there's a great deal we don't know at this point. We don't know, for example, which installations were actually taken out in Iran.

I mentioned we don't know what's happening in Israel either. In the last round in June—the so-called 12-day war—about 480 buildings were destroyed there. None of it was reported in the Western press due to military censorship and Zionist control of the American and other Western media. So we don't know. It's far too early to judge the answer to the kind of question you raised. I will say, though, that in one respect there's a Security Council meeting that got underway as we began to speak. It'll be interesting to watch that. We have the usual vassal-state-style statements of support from some key European countries.

We have a ridiculous statement from President Macron, who said that he commanded the Iranians to negotiate in good faith, as though they were the ones managing a deception. Very hard to understand—unless you take into account his political weakness and the strength of the Zionist lobby in France, as well as the very strong Islamophobia there. But we've had statements from Germany, from Britain, and so on, that basically seem to toe the American line. We'll see what happens in the Security Council. I think anyone who still doubted that the former regulation of international affairs by international law was alive should now understand that it isn't. And that is a loss for the United States in terms of reputation, I think.

#Glenn

Yeah, the German chancellor as well, Merz—he was also tweeting out his comments that now the Iranians can choose their own leadership. So they seem to be going with the idea that this is about democracy. Yeah, regime change. This is somehow about democracy. I find it... well, it's bizarre. It's very bizarre.

#Chas Freeman

Let us recall that the protests were fueled by the smuggling in of 50,000 Starlink sets for discontented Iranians. The protests themselves were set off by—or at least, as Scott Besant, the American Secretary of the Treasury, claims—he and the Treasury destroyed the Iranian currency and therefore were able to initiate the protests. Once the protests began, the people with the Starlink connections began to agitate to move them from peaceful protests into violent riots. We've had a huge propaganda campaign greatly exaggerating the number of deaths in Iran, either among protesters or maybe agents of foreign interests who were exploiting the protests. We know those claims are exaggerated, though we don't have an exact, reliable figure from Iran itself.

And so this is yet another case where it's right out of the playbook: you immiserate people, make them so wretched that they feel obliged to protest and demand change from their own government—some kind of response to the misery you're causing. And then you say to them, which is what we apparently did say in these negotiations, "Look, you've got to give up your ability to defend yourselves. Get rid of your missiles, or we'll bomb you." And of course, if you get rid of your missiles, we'll probably bomb you too. So what kind of thing is that? There are so many bizarre elements to

this. And I think the underlying assumption—that Iranians will react to misery by blaming not the source of the misery, the United States and its sanctions and the West, but their own government—is very, very dubious, at least.

#Glenn

Well, I see the same propaganda being very heavy in this country. The whole narrative is essentially that we can't let the Ayatollahs acquire a nuclear weapon. The whole premise is that they're irrational actors, extremists, and that they're pursuing a nuclear weapon. And, you know, this is... yeah, and then, of course, you add that additional layer about democracy and human rights, and it becomes almost immoral to be against war at this point.

#Chas Freeman

Yeah, and then, you know, actually the country in the region that did cheat and clandestinely develop a nuclear weapon—including through the theft of uranium from the United States—is Israel. And so this is, in a sense, an extreme case of mirror imaging: Israel looks in the mirror and thinks, "Good heavens, what I did, they must be doing too." Well, so far there's no evidence. You know, there's a wonderful thing circulating on the Internet, a stela written in cuneiform from 3000 B.C., which says Iran is only a few days away from a bomb. And, you know, I mean, they've been only a few days away, or a few years, or a few months, or something, for as long as I can remember.

I was told in 1991 to go to the then-Crown Prince Abdullah, when I was ambassador in Saudi Arabia, and warn him that Iran was two years away from a bomb. That was in 1991. You know, here we are—I think more than two years have passed since then. And so we have these continual warnings about something that the intelligence agencies that actually look at these things say is not true. But it's politically true. It's not factually true. In a world where nothing is true and everything is plausible, this becomes the accepted wisdom. Why? Because Prime Minister Netanyahu, who knows better from his own intelligence services, finds it an extremely convenient way to get countries like Norway, or the United States, or whoever, behind him in his hostility to Iran.

And, you know, obviously, if you listen to Israeli spokesmen—I just heard Naftali Bennett, the former prime minister, speak—his wording is identical to that of Donald Trump. Well, one might expect there's been a bit of coordination, maybe even a kind of conspiracy. And one would be right. But the mainstream media—I don't know about Norway, but certainly in the United States—won't print anything critical of Israel or Israeli policy, and they toe the line. Therefore, there's no opposition to the flood of falsehoods.

#Glenn

Well, if we look beyond the science—the strategy, or lack thereof—and at what's actually happening in terms of who's striking what, how do you assess the impact on the economy, especially for the

Gulf states? Because, as you've seen, Iran has now shut down the Strait of Hormuz. About 20% of the world's oil goes through there. More importantly for the Gulf states, how are they going to survive? Of course, they have reserves, but what will be the wider impact here?

#Chas Freeman

Well, it varies from country to country. I mean, oddly enough, Oman, which is mostly outside the Strait of Hormuz, has very limited reserves. And to the extent that its oil exports are affected, it will be in financial difficulty. The UAE has a strong reserve position, a huge state investment fund. Saudi Arabia is somewhat behind it. Saudi Arabia is already in financial difficulty because of the low price of oil. To the extent that it's able to export oil—which it won't be able to do through the Persian Gulf, where it does most of its exporting—to that extent, it's going to benefit from the enormous inflation of energy prices on the global level that we can now expect.

So, you know, a country like Kuwait is far less dependent on oil exports than it is on coupon clipping from bonds, stocks, and other investments. The Kuwaiti income from investments dwarfs its oil income. Bahrain is very vulnerable. It is, in some respects, an offshoot of Saudi Arabia, which can be expected to help it—but charity generally begins and ends at home. Bahrain, of course, has been the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, which was apparently struck during this initial round of retaliations. Qatar has enormous reserves and, of course, shares a gas field in the Persian Gulf with Iran. But they're all going to get shut down, including Iran.

Iran ships its oil through the Strait of Hormuz. So this is, in fact, a kind of suicide move by Iran in economic terms. What the implications will be depends on how long this goes on—and that we don't know. We can't tell how long it will last. It's not going to be over in a few days. So at what point oil prices will become ridiculously high is a matter of conjecture right now, but it seems likely. And let me just say one thing about shutting the Strait of Hormuz: the minute you declare a blockade of some sort, as the Houthi government in Yemen did in the Red Sea, insurance companies won't provide coverage to ships. So the shippers can't use that route.

And it's not a matter of shooting or sinking ships. You just get Lloyd's of London to be unwilling to underwrite insurance on ships, and that's exactly what will happen. So you won't have anyone other than a military vessel daring to brave the blockade. And here again, I'd just say that the Houthis, who were fairly primitive in their weaponry and capabilities, were able to defeat the United States, which spent over a billion dollars and expended a vast amount of weaponry trying to relieve the blockade—and failed. The Iranians are vastly more capable than the Houthis, so I don't think anybody's going to be running this blockade anytime soon.

#Glenn

But as we see now, Iran has struck from the airport in Dubai to the ports in the United Arab Emirates. How far can this go before it pulls these actors directly into war—or do they not really have anything to fight with to begin with?

#Chas Freeman

I don't think they want to get involved in this war. And, you know, you're correct—Dubai International Airport, which is the largest in the world, is now shut down, as is the Maktoum Airport, the other one. So I think there's an enormous disruption of transit—air travel, ship travel, energy supply—all in store. And it will be very painful not just for the countries in the region, but for the world.

#Glenn

We've already shut down our access to air travel across Russia. All air travel now seems to go through the Middle East, and that whole region appears to be shutting down as well. It's a bit surprising—or maybe not surprising—but it's concerning that with all these conflicts around the world, the only thing being done is to throw more gasoline on the fire. There seems to be very little serious attempt to actually put an end to any of this.

#Chas Freeman

If by a serious attempt you mean diplomacy, obviously diplomacy is now used simply as a means of deception to serve military purposes. That's the lesson of multiple American negotiations with others. And I note that this is having its effect. We're talking about Iran, the United States, and Israel, but we might as well be talking about Russia, Ukraine, and the Europeans. I think Moscow's interest in continuing negotiations on the Ukraine issue with the United States is clearly on the wane. There's no enthusiasm—why should there be? The negotiators we've appointed have no credibility. They've been flying all over the place, mostly in Geneva recently, deceiving people and not reaching any agreement. When they do agree to specific elements of a deal, they then repudiate them. They have no authority from anybody other than Donald Trump, and Donald Trump makes up his mind from minute to minute.

#Glenn

But in terms of escalation, both regionally and globally—well, regionally, I guess we've seen some of that—but what about the possibility of pulling in Turkey or Egypt, some of the larger countries? Do you see a threat of that? Or even worse, if the Russians or Chinese begin to play a more overt role? I assume they're already doing a bit to make sure Iran doesn't get defeated.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think the Russian and Chinese response will, as you suggest, largely be limited to a combination of rhetorical support, political and diplomatic backing at the UN and elsewhere, and technology and defensive weapons transfers—which are going to be a bit difficult under conditions where shipping lanes are shut down and so forth. But the broader point, I think, is that the Chinese and Russians will make hay out of the discrediting of the United States. To your question about whether the war should widen further—what would Egypt and Turkey do? Why would they be in on this? They certainly wouldn't support Israel and the United States in this context. Could they make common cause with Iran?

Well, the Turks might usefully provide weaponry and indirect military support. Egypt doesn't really have the capability to do that. I don't think the Egyptians are very unhappy with the Israelis, but I don't see them creating a diversion. So I'm not sure how the war would expand beyond the Levant and Iran—the Persian Gulf countries. There is a possibility, of course, depending on how badly Israel behaves, that Pakistan, which has a defense pact now with Saudi Arabia and has been the target of Israeli operations, is currently the target of Indian operations—the Indians supporting the Taliban in the war between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There is some danger that Pakistan could be drawn in. It has a huge number—like India—of its citizens working in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries. It also has a history of providing support in the past. For example, during the War of the Cities—the war between Iran and Iraq—Pakistan helped garrison Saudi Arabia. During Operation Desert Storm, Pakistan garrisoned southern Saudi Arabia and protected it against Yemen, which was part of the triad attempting to rewrite Middle East borders.

Saddam Hussein, King Hussein of Jordan, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Afghanistan and Yemen were all part of a plan that didn't work. So there are possibilities, but I don't think the great powers—China and Russia—want to get involved. I don't see the Egyptians taking action, and I think Turkey would limit its support to technology and weaponry rather than directly involve itself. But who knows? I mean, one of the things about war is that wars are very easy to start unilaterally, but they're very, very hard to end. And you can't control them. They're a gamble. So you're right to be concerned, but I don't see the mechanism for expansion at this point.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, the comments coming out of Turkey and Egypt so far have focused on concerns for their—well, they're not allies, but at least their friends, the Gulf states. So, not expressed as any support for the U.S. or Israel in terms of the attack, but more... yeah, I guess something like that had to be said to show some solidarity with the Gulf states without actually doing anything. This is the last question: has the train left the station now, or is there any way to put an end to this? Can Trump realize he made a horrible mistake, claim that, "Well, I called Iran, they promised they'll

behave better now, they're going to be serious in negotiations"? Some of this nonsense always blows over. And if this war goes on now—I know there are a lot of unknown variables—but where do you think it will be heading, if you had to guess?

#Chas Freeman

Many people believe, rightly or wrongly, that Iran is actually better equipped to manage a war of attrition than Israel or the United States. The United States, as I mentioned, has depleted a great deal of its arsenal in other adventures elsewhere, and in the earlier defense of Israel. Israel basically wasn't able to continue defending itself during the June so-called 12-day war. At the end of it, you know, it was vulnerable to Iranian attack. Here's a question I don't know the answer to—perhaps someone does. If you look at the June war, where Iran mounted the first effective response to Israeli aggression by anyone in the region for many decades, it began its missile barrage on Israel by using its more obsolete, less capable missiles with the purpose of depleting Israel's self-defense capability. And it succeeded at that. It ended the war with hypersonic missiles.

Breaking through was what remained of Israeli defense and American and British assistance. And by the way, you asked about the expansion of the war—Keir Starmer, you know, began by saying Britain wasn't going to be part of it. But now he's talking about having the RAF, the British Royal Air Force, up and about, supporting the American ally and everything else. So there's an expansion happening right in front of our eyes. I don't think at this point anybody can really tell you with assurance when this will stop or how it will stop. Eventually it will stop—but how long "eventually" is, and what the conditions will be when that happens, is another matter. There may very well be an Iran that has been shaken but not stirred into rebellion, as Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, I think, falsely believe it might be.

#Glenn

Well, that's what you said—this war of attrition. We already had that in June, and the Israelis and Americans were exhausted after 12 days. I'm wondering what would be different now, I guess.

#Chas Freeman

Exactly. We don't know. The claim is that the Iranians had ramped up missile production, and of course their nuclear program, which had previously been officially obliterated, had somehow revived and was becoming an imminent danger. I think the correct analogy here is North Korea. If you push hard enough at a proud people, they'll respond by developing some capability you don't like. And we saw this, in a sense, on 9/11, when we learned that if you bomb people, they'll bomb back. And if they don't have bombers to do it with, they'll repurpose passenger aircraft as cruise missiles to do it. Human ingenuity will not be subdued by threats; in fact, it tends to be stimulated by them. So how will this end? I don't know. And I think we have to leave it there. Yeah.

#Glenn

Well, I think at least it seems very certain that Trump's assumption that this could be a quick victory was wrong. On the contrary, I think this will have implications for decades to come. So, well, thank you very much for taking the time. I know you're supposed to be on holiday now, so I appreciate you doing this.

#Chas Freeman

Well, it's always a holiday with you, Glenn Diesen. Thank you.