

Steven Jermy: Iran War Endgame & the Global Fallout

Royal Navy Commodore Steve Jermy commanded warships in the 5th Destroyer Squadron and Britain's Fleet Air Arm. He served in the Falklands War and in the Adriatic for the Bosnian and Kosovo campaigns. Then retired after an operational tour, in 2007, as Strategy Director in the British Embassy in Afghanistan. He is the author of the book: "Strategy for Action: Using Force Wisely in the 21st Century". <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Strategy-Action-Using-Wisely-Century/dp/1908134003>
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#Glenn

Welcome back. Today we're joined by retired Royal Navy Commodore Steven Jermy, who commanded warships in the 5th Destroyer Squadron and Britain's Fleet Air Arm. He was also strategy director at the British Embassy in Afghanistan. Thank you for coming back on—it's good to see you again.

#Guest

Yeah, it's good to be back, Glenn. They say, "May you live in interesting times," and we certainly do.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, the last two days have been especially interesting. The war against Iran is very different from anything we've seen or done over the past 30 years, it seems. I mean, in terms of a war, there doesn't seem to be a clear strategy. The planning appears to have been insufficient for a smaller war situation. There seems to be little capacity to defend all the assets in the region. There's no escalation dominance, it seems, and too many things that could go wrong now seem to be going wrong. Simply put, I don't really understand the decision to go to war, given that so many of the variables here were uncertain. But you're our Royal Navy Commodore—what are you looking at to assess whether the Americans and the Israelis will be defeated here, or if they'll win?

#Guest

I'm looking at the analysis from two points of view, Glenn. The first is at the political-military level, and then the shorter term—how I think the campaign will actually play out. The second is at what I call the grand strategic level—what this looks like in the medium to longer term. It's quite subtle at that second level, but we might want to approach the question at those two levels, looking first at the political and military level. I think a good introduction to this is the work of two people you'll know as well as I do. The first is General von Clausewitz, who said that before entering into a war, you really need to understand the nature of the war.

And I've got a strong sense that the Americans don't understand the nature of the war. The other thing is General André Beaufre, a French general I'm a fan of, who said that in war, the loser deserves to lose because his defeat will be a consequence of failures in thinking, either before or during the war. And I'm worried that failures in thinking before the war are likely to lead to consequences that not only result in a potential defeat for the forces of Israel and America, but also have wider consequences that run against the interests of the West and, indeed, the global economy. So that's the way I've been thinking about it. In terms of the strategic objectives, I think at least we can be clear.

I think one thing I'd say is, I'd just challenge you on one point—you said this isn't like the last wars. I think it is like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and then Syria, in that there isn't really a strategy. So again, we seem to be in the same situation where we haven't thought it through strategically. That said, there does seem to be a strategy here from Israel's and America's point of view, which is to achieve regime change through air power. Now, that's a big deal—achieving regime change through air power—not least because I can't remember when it was last done, or if indeed it's ever been done, since regime change usually requires something more substantial.

You need substantial forces on the ground, which, of course, neither Israel nor the United States want to commit to. So I think at least we do understand the approach that's being taken. I think it's really important to be clear about that regime change objective, because the success or failure of the campaign depends on it. And if regime change isn't achieved, then it seems to me that, from Israel's and the United States' point of view, this will be a failure. From Iran's point of view, the objective seems to be simply to survive.

Because if they can survive—and not necessarily, I don't think they'd ever expect to defeat Israel and the United States outright—but if they can survive and do significant damage, and I think that damage is already starting to happen, then it will be a victory for them. So survival, really, a bit like it has been for Hamas and Hezbollah, is about not being defeated rather than winning. And for the Iranians, I think not being defeated is a win. So that's the way I'm starting to think about it. And then, thinking about the campaign as well—which we could talk about—but is that your sense too, Glenn, of what the overall objectives and strategy look like?

#Glenn

Yes, I think so, because it's—well, I think the U.S. and the Israelis probably planned for a quick war where they knock out the leadership, and then the assumption would be that the whole thing would fall apart. And again, some of the messages were like, "Take to the streets. We've taken out the military leadership, the political leadership. There's chaos now. You can have your freedom." I think they don't appreciate that, for example, to kill Khamenei—the highest religious authority—is not going to cause people to storm the streets in support of the United States. It's going to make people very patriotic and go out in defense of their own government. So I think there were a lot of miscalculations about how they would be received.

I think for the Iranians, time is probably on their side because, as I said, they just have to survive. They have to exhaust their adversary and inflict enough pain to make sure this wouldn't be done again. But I agree there's a lot of commonality compared to the last 30 years because—well, in Afghanistan, we had a 20-year war only to replace the Taliban with the Taliban. In Iraq, you know, all those hundreds of thousands of dead—and what was achieved? Iraq is now more closely aligned with Iran. We used to balance Iran; now it's closely aligned with Iran, which is supposed to be the main regional adversary. Of course, Libya had some stability, and now it's just flooding Europe with refugees. It's been a mess for 15 years. In Syria, we had a government that at least respected minority rights.

Now we have an ISIS leader essentially ruling it as our ally. It's just... well, when we went into all these things, we had other ambitions. But again, there's very little room for criticism in terms of what can actually be achieved. Even if, you know, the goal was to change regimes in all these countries—where has there been success? And it's always the same. Whenever there's the next war, it's the same idea that if you criticize it, then you're, you know, not patriotic enough. It's very frustrating to see that we do the same thing over and over again. But my point is that Iran is very different from all these other failures. This is, as we see now, a country that can absorb a lot of pain and dish out a lot of punishment to those who attack it.

#Guest

Yeah, indeed. I think the interesting thing is that the Shia mentality of actually absorbing pain plays to a broader audience—not just in Iran, but in what I would call fundamentalist Islam—who see this as, again, fighting against the evil Satan or Satans. I'm not suggesting that's necessarily right, but I'm just saying how this plays out. I think, going back to the wars you've mentioned, the one that was particularly interesting for me is Iraq. Because what we did in Iraq, I think, was we went in there—or the Americans went in there—with lots of support from others, deposed the government, didn't allow the Ba'athist structures to remain in place, and assumed that democracy would break out. Now, of course, what happened was that when elections took place, the 20% Sunni Ba'athist leadership was deposed democratically by the 60% Shia, who voted, not surprisingly, for Shia leaders. And, of course, the Kurds have always wanted to be independent anyway.

So you then got a shift, which is why, quite foreseeably, the Iraqis moved closer to the Iranians because of the Shia relationship between the two nations. I mean, I think at the moment, as I see the campaign, I would think that the Americans and Israelis are probably satisfied, although it's very difficult to say with the relatively low level of information we've got. From what I can see, the first part of the campaign used the Americans in support roles and the Israelis for strike roles. So TLAMs—sorry, that's Tomahawk missiles, Glenn—were the primary means by which the strikes were carried out by the Americans, although I suspect they'll have drones in as well, with aircraft apparently being used by the Israelis, although we don't know for sure.

I think the interesting thing is that if the Israelis were flying aircraft over Iran, that gives a sense of uncertainty about the impact they feel they've had on the air defense system. It suggests to me that they've achieved some success against those systems. Although I did hear that Iranian aircraft have been flying over Tehran, so it seems it's not complete. What they haven't achieved is air supremacy, and I guess that may still be some way off. But when they do have air supremacy—if they can get it, or air superiority, I should say—that would mean American and Israeli aircraft could operate with reasonable impunity across Iran.

The issue, I think, is Iran's ability to respond. The missile attacks are, as I expected, against American bases in the Gulf nations. Although it's interesting that the BBC is talking about attacks on the Gulf nations rather than on American bases in those nations. I suspect there's been one or two bits of collateral damage, but I'd be surprised if those Iranian attacks are aimed at the Gulf nations themselves. Rather, I think they're directed at U.S. forces. But much more important, I think, are the attacks on Israel. It's very difficult to get a sense of what that looks like, but I would expect those attacks to be focused on infrastructure—military, energy, and anything connected to Israel's economy.

This time, I'd expect the attacks to be much more intense and to go on for as long as the Iranians can sustain them. That seems critical to the whole campaign, because if the Iranians can maintain a sustained bombardment of Israel—approaching the twelve-day mark, when Israel, as we now know, asked the Americans to intervene because they couldn't take it—if they can go beyond that, then I suspect any offers of negotiation from the Americans or the Israelis, if we reach a point where Israel can't take it, will be rejected. I think the Iranians will just keep going, because they won't trust either the Israelis or the Americans to keep their word.

So I think the way this campaign will play out will depend on the ability of the Americans to actually wear down those strategic bombardment forces, and on the ability of the Israelis—their economy and society—to sustain and prolong the bombardment. Again, it's difficult to say how that will play out, but I think that's the key thing on which the campaign will hinge. My guess is that if we get to twelve days—and I've heard that the Americans are looking for the campaign to end in about a month—if we get anywhere near a month and the Iranians are still in good or effective shape, then I think we'll be looking at a very difficult decision for the Americans, less so for the Israelis.

But if the Americans are expecting to achieve campaign success in a month, and we haven't seen any sign of that campaign, that'll put them in a very difficult situation. Again, I think the issue here with the Iranians is the regime's capacity to maintain control—to maintain the regime in the face of bombardment, but also calls from the West for those within Iran to rise up. I think that's an open question. My guess is that they'll find it very difficult, because it's generally hard to do these things from the air. So my guess is that the campaign will end up in a strategic reversal for the Israelis and the Americans. But we probably won't know that until at least day fifteen, if not until the end of the month.

#Glenn

Well, yeah, because I'm thinking the same—that Iran has every incentive in the world to suggest they have almost unlimited missiles. And again, it's possible that they do, in some underground storage. But if their enemies believe they can fight on for months and months based on those stockpiles, then no one would dare attack them. But because there's such a threat coming from abroad, it's... And we don't really know that much, do we, about Iranian weaponry? I mean, when I speak to any Iranians, of course they'll say, "Well, we have a lot, a lot," but there's no way to verify that.

And of course, it would be foolish to show where these weapons are, but I think, on the other hand, the United States probably underestimated them—as did the Israelis—as evident from that 12-day war. But if you were in the United States, how would you assess progress in this war? Would it be the destruction of air defenses primarily, so you can begin to control the skies? Or what are they actually going for? I guess if they were able to knock out the government on the first day and encourage regime change, that would be one thing. But if that doesn't happen—if the government stands strong and this becomes a war of attrition—what are they going after?

#Guest

Well, I would say that if regime change is my primary objective—and from what Trump has said, it is—then what we'd call the supporting objectives are those that enable us to achieve regime change. One of those would be the suppression of enemy air defenses, so you could operate with impunity across the campaign. The question is, how do you depose a regime when you're operating only from the air? That's a very, very good question, because I can't see it, obviously. Even if air superiority—or even supremacy—is achieved, without boots on the ground it would require those Iranians who do want regime change to rise up and attempt to overthrow the IRGC and the other Iranian forces.

So I think that's a very, very difficult call, which is why even for the Americans to achieve air superiority, and for the Israelis to achieve air superiority and air supremacy, I think that would still... The Americans may get lucky. The Israelis may get lucky, with those who are against the regime rising up. But I'd say there's a 70–30 chance that they won't—that the regime will maintain its control over the population. Not least because I suspect quite a few people will rally around the flag

and be much more interested in opposing an external change of government than actually doing it themselves internally. I once wrote in an article for The London Times many, many years ago, that when you're getting involved in operations, especially in the Middle East, the first principle should be: do no harm.

And I think there's quite a strong chance that we would have done more harm than good here, just as we have in the last four interventions in this region. Again, a lot of it comes down to not really understanding how the regime works, and how the politics and religion within it are so closely interlinked that it's often best to think of them as one thing—which is obviously not the case in the West. The danger is that, too often in the West, we assume people think as we do, and we fail to do the proper analysis. Whereas when you actually look into these countries, they're very, very different in how they think and feel. I'll give you a good example: when I was in Afghanistan, it took us ages to actually work out what the insurgency was.

We took it as an Afghan insurgency against Western forces. But I can remember sitting in the ISAF headquarters in Kabul in 2007, with a map of the incidents—the warfighting incidents—against Western forces, and a map of the Pashtun tribes. And we suddenly realized the two things were completely contemporaneous; they were completely aligned. We realized that what we had was not an Afghan insurgency, but a Pashtun insurgency. And that was, what, four or six years into the campaign. I think getting a really good understanding of how the regime thinks, and the makeup of the country, is essential before embarking on anything like this. I don't think I've seen much sign of that at all. I don't know whether you have, but I certainly haven't.

#Glenn

No, I think it's definitely important to know who one is fighting against. But I get the impression that's another miscalculation, perhaps with the kind of weapons being used. The U.S. might be trying to stop the initial attacks by Iran and then believing that Iran is being exhausted because of the old weaponry. But from Iran's side, they say they're doing the opposite—that they're clearing out the old missiles and old drones first, just to exhaust the American air defenses. And then, once those are depleted, they'll bring out the more modern weapons.

I'm not sure if this is correct. It seemed that in the 12-day war, at least, they first used older equipment. It's just unclear which side would be exhausting the other, as it would be in a war of attrition. But I did want to ask you about the attacks on all the American bases across the Gulf states. Do you think this is a risk, in terms of provoking those countries to join the war against Iran? Or do you think this is a strategic move—a smart thing to do—to send a clear warning against allowing the U.S. to use them?

Because if you look, for example, at the war with Russia, we see that the Europeans can almost act with impunity. They can say, "We're going to send these weapons, we're going to do deep strikes, we'll do this, we'll do that." And the Russians don't retaliate. It seems as if the Iranians just want to

set a clear precedent that anyone who assists will be hit. I'm just wondering how you assess this strategy from the Iranians. Is this something that will spread the war to their disadvantage, or is it something that will clearly restore their deterrence and make the region more cautious about cooperating with the Americans?

#Guest

I think it's a finely balanced judgment, but I'd say it's more likely to make the region more cautious. It would be a mistake to assume that the Sunni Gulf states are great fans of Iran. There's a lot of antipathy between the two, and there has been for a long time—until, of course, the Palestine situation kicked off and people began to draw away from Israel. We saw that the Abraham Accords were going to be signed, but then suddenly they weren't. So there's a lot of antipathy, but I think part of it exists at the elite level rather than among the general population. Because, of course, what you've got in the Gulf states are autocratic governments—let's be quite clear about that—in the same way that the Iranian state is autocratic in its own ways.

So they're not democracies but autocratic monarchies. And I think one of the concerns the monarchies in these states will have is that what the Iranians are doing will be quite popular with their populations, who've watched the way operations have been conducted in Palestine against other Arab and Islamic nations. So I think that among their populations, there may well be quite a bit of support for what the Iranians are doing, in which case they may be very cautious about doing anything like declaring war or siding with the Americans and the Israelis. They've talked loudly about how the Iranian retaliation is unjustified.

But I suspect that as long as the Iranians keep their retaliation going, focused on the American bases, then the message will be the one you suggested. I've heard in the media, of course, that there have been attacks in places other than the American bases. I doubt that's deliberate—I suspect it's either the weapons have gone in the wrong direction or they've been shot down, and you've had collateral damage as a result of the weapons falling where they weren't targeted. It could also be air defense missiles coming down as well. So there's a range of reasons. I'd just be surprised—I can't imagine why the Iranians would think it's in their interest to target the Gulf state populations more broadly. I think keeping it at the air and naval bases makes more sense to me.

So that would be my sense of it. Glenn, and coming back to your point about whether they're using the earlier, more obsolete missiles first—I suspect they probably are. I thought their attacks during the first 12-day war were quite sophisticated in how they were carried out. So it seems to me they're probably using up the older stuff, not least because, as an air defender, you don't know what's coming at you. You just know something's coming, and you have to assume the worst case and work to shoot it down. And of course, what that does is use up ammunition.

I was fascinated to hear Scott Ritter say—I think it might have been with you, or maybe with Judge Napolitano—that an American admiral, the Chief of Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was removed

three days ago. The feedback was that he was removed because he said, "We haven't got enough ammunition to do this." And when you think about both the amount of ammunition being pushed toward the Ukraine war, and the difficulty we in the West—and America in particular—have in producing ammunition at scale and speed, it wouldn't surprise me if ammunition stocks were an issue here.

And that, too, might play into the timing of this, Glenn. If the war has—if they know their ammunition is limited after the end of March—then, you know, you've got the answer to the question about what happens next. They'll have to stop. But again, I don't know. It might be the end of March, it might be the end of April—who knows? We just don't know what the ammunition stocks might look like. But it wouldn't surprise me if it's a key factor in their thinking, and in the need to actually bring the war to a close more quickly than might otherwise be possible.

#Glenn

Yeah, but my comment on escalation control is that it might not be up to the Americans when and how this war comes to an end. I think for the Iranians, a key objective would be to restore deterrence—to make sure the U.S. doesn't come back in another six months and do this again. They'd want to, I guess, inflict enough pain to ensure it doesn't happen again. But yeah, we see all these military targets, of course—the bases across the region. Do you think Iran might escalate further, going after more economic or energy targets?

#Guest

I think the one that would surprise me—it's not impossible, but I'd be surprised if they went after Gulf States' energy infrastructure. I just don't think it's in their interests. I might be wrong. But what I do see is them going after Israeli infrastructure. So I'd expect to see them targeting the ports. I know they've already targeted Haifa. I'd expect to see them, as well as the military and intelligence targets, going after the ports, the transport infrastructure, and the energy infrastructure in Israel—within the limits of their systems' accuracy—because those are critical for the survival of Israeli society.

So that's what I'd expect to see them doing. And Israel is a small nation—it's one-eighth the size of Iran. So they've got a much better chance, I'd say, of destroying that infrastructure than the reverse, even were the Americans and Israelis to achieve full air superiority or air supremacy. So that's where I'd expect to see their focus. It'll be interesting to see—I see that they've actually closed the straits for most traffic, but only through warnings rather than mining it or using force. And that's the other place I expect to, or I'm watching with interest, to see how that develops.

It would be very straightforward to mine the Straits of Hormuz, and very difficult for the West, the Israelis, or anyone else to do anything about it. But so far, I've heard that they've actually issued warnings, and the traffic in the Straits of Hormuz has basically come to a stop, as far as I can see.

So it's had an effect. I'd also expect that even if there were still traffic, the insurance rates would be high. The figure I've heard is 10% of the overall value of the ship or oil cargo, which is a big deal in terms of insurance. So that's bound to have an effect on the global economy, or at least on oil within the global economy.

Although I don't think that effect will be as quick as some people say. It might show up quickly in oil prices, but less so in refined products, which will still be delivered under the old contracts, with the cost of the old oil built into the supply chain. So it's also a bit of a two-edged sword, because, of course, China relies quite heavily on Iranian oil. It's a bit of a two-edged sword in terms of how they manage that. So, to summarize, I think the focus will be on Israel and Israel's economic capacity, and it'll be interesting to see how that, too, plays into America.

#Glenn

Well, I'm glad you brought up China, because this isn't just the U.S. and Israel on one side and Iran on the other. As we can see, attacking all these bases across the region pulls a lot of countries in one way or another. But Iran is also—again—it's not Yemen, and it's not Syria. It's a massive country at the southern end of the Eurasian continent. So, how do you see this war in the wider context, in the struggle between the different great powers? Unless we assume Trump launched this war to help protesters or promote democracy, what are the broader geopolitical struggles or the gamble here?

#Guest

I've always thought there are three key things in the geopolitical context at the moment—the global geopolitical context—but there's a fourth to add to that. The first is the shift from a unipolar to a tripolar world, with three great powers: China, Russia, and the United States. The second is the rather perilous state of the global economy. And the third is the situation in global energy supplies. To that, in this particular case, I'd also add the role that radical Islam plays in the Middle East and elsewhere. Taking the first of those, I think the key issue here is that China is significantly dependent on external oil. And here, the thing I think I got wrong in the initial analysis of why the war might happen was that I didn't really think about Eliot Cohen and the national security strategy, and how that was being constructed in a way that sought to regain America's unipolar position.

So Elbridge Colby, of course, is the thinker, I think, behind a lot of what's going on in the United States. And when you look at his work, it seems clear that he believes it's possible for America—for the United States—to regain a unipolar position. I think he's wrong. But nevertheless, I've seen very good analysis from Andrew Korybko, who has talked about this particular war being part of a broader strategy, in which Venezuela was one part and Iran now is another. So it's seeking to either pull Iran away from BRICS and from its relationships with China and Russia, and move it toward a relationship much closer to America—ideally, I'm sure, one like it was before the Shah was deposed.

I think that's a really, really difficult thing to do. And if that's their view, then it's a view that underestimates the way Iranians—particularly those within fundamentalist Islam—feel about the United States. What confused me was that I was fifty-fifty about whether the war would take place, because it seemed to me there were so many downsides and little chance of success. I said to Danny Davis, I think two or three days ago, that if it was going to happen, it would be in the middle of next week, when people had time to clear their embassies. But I rather think now that this has been planned for some time—planned for weeks.

The date has been planned for weeks as part of this broader strategy. Because if you see the war as part of a broader strategy, it's not just about regime change—it's about confronting China—then I can see that that might sort of shift the calculation in the White House toward, "Okay, well, let's take the risk, because it's worth it for that broader reason." I happen to think that it's reasoning that's likely to be highly unsuccessful, because I think people don't understand why China has got to where it is, and they don't understand the relationship between China and how you develop the military power of a nation, which has to do with energy and industrial capacity.

And China is so far ahead in terms of industrial capacity compared to anybody else that we're talking about something like twenty years before we'd get anywhere near it. So I just wonder if that was one of the factors. It makes sense to me. And I found Andrew's analysis very plausible. I think the third part of this is the energy situation. Again, this ties back into China. So it's not only the energy situation, but the energy and economic situation. I mean, what you've got in China is a nation holding on to a lot of American debt. And in America, you have a rather parallel situation regarding how you refinance your debt tsunami, which is coming up. I think most of it needs to be refinanced this year or next year. And if China's not going to buy it—and indeed, if China decides aggressively to sell it—then what does that do for the dollar?

And what does that do for the American economic situation, which already looks... it looks difficult. I mean, it's bad. If America's bad, then think what it's like for the European nations—particularly the British, the French, and the Germans—all of whom are in fairly perilous situations and will not be looking with great joy at the prospect of high energy prices. They're bad enough as it is, but imagine what it's like when it's going to be... So I think, for all these reasons, if there's a narrow focus on China, then it misses these broader strategic things that are going on. And for all those reasons, I think the chances of us doing more harm than good are high and increasing. Again, I'd be curious to see what you think about that.

#Glenn

Well, it does seem that, whether or not one does more harm than good, a lot of the great power strategies have been almost all-or-nothing. For example, with the Biden administration—based on the rhetoric you heard from much of the military and political leadership—the idea was more or less that, with Russia and China moving closer, if we could use the Ukrainians to knock Russia out of the ranks of great powers, then we could focus all our resources on countering China. And that would be

the way to restore U.S. primacy in the world. But then, of course, this began to fail. And then you see Trump taking a different approach: saying, well, we're not going to be able to defeat the Russians.

Let's try instead to win them over a little bit. I think it's unrealistic to expect the Russians to switch from China, but at least we could get some daylight between them. Russia would like to diversify, make good relations with the United States, and then, you know, a natural balance of power would assert itself, which is in its favor. Now, I think a similar logic appeared, possibly with Iran. That is, you see this powerful Iran, which is important to this wider Eurasian constellation with China, Russia, and Iran. And the idea is that we can knock out the Iranians—either put them on our side under some U.S.-friendly government, or just make a big mess out of it so it can't be used as a partner for anyone else.

But again, if this fails as well, it's just going to cement Iran's determination to look toward Russia and China as necessary partners. And I think that's what happened with the Russians too. They now need the Chinese more than ever, and I think it could be the same with the Iranians. So it seems that either we knock them out and the distribution of power shifts in our favor, or we fail and end up cementing a very powerful de facto alliance against us. It's a very desperate strategy, it seems. I don't know—I like to see strategies where you can improve a little or improve a lot, but here it's an either-or situation every time, it seems. So again, I might be interpreting it incorrectly, but...

#Guest

I think you're right, Glenn. I think you're actually on the money. One of the other things that plays into this as well—which didn't, for example, play out in Venezuela but does here—is that when you look at these last, if you include Iran now, these last five or so interventions, they've all failed. There's another, more subtle issue here, which is the role of fundamentalist Islam. My brother is a brilliant analyst of this, and he explains that what we're seeing within Islam is a civil war that's been going on inside the religion—really two overlapping civil wars. On one hand, you have the fundamentalists and the reformers; on the other, the Sunni and the Shia.

And the fundamental thing they're all trying to work out is how, in so many ways, the West has succeeded since the 1850s, whereas the Islamic world has not. One of the things that seems to bind them is that the fundamentalists tend to say, well, the problem has been the West, actually—it's the way they've operated with us: colonialism, intervention. The reformers, on the other hand, are much more pro-West. They'd much prefer to see a situation where they're moving—not necessarily liberalizing their societies—but they're not so hard-nosed about how the Quran is interpreted and how they deal with the West. And I think this is a fact that I've seen very little understanding of, particularly in the United States.

And I think the great danger is, if you look at those interventions—what did we do in Afghanistan? As you say, we deposed the Taliban, spent twenty years there, and now the Taliban is back in

charge. In Iraq, we assumed that democracy would break out, but we now have a much more Shia-leaning country. It's interesting that Sistani, who is a great theologian in Iraq, is much less interventionist in politics, unlike al-Khamenei and, it appears, his new successor. Then in Libya, we apparently went in under a "responsibility to protect," but really we deposed Gaddafi—despite what we said at the time. And last, but by no means least, is Syria, where we tried to depose an Alawite-led government.

And the Alawites, as my brother always said, would fight to the death because they knew they'd probably be slaughtered by the overwhelming Sunni population within Syria. What we've essentially done is take what was ISIS and tried to work against it. So we've now re-established the caliphate—but it's just in Syria. If anybody can tell me why that's a good idea, I'm open to offers. But I think the great danger here is that as long as we keep intervening, we're going to do more harm than good.

And if the Americans are intervening largely on the basis of regime change—"let's balkanize Iran and do this because it's in our national interest, the way we see our grand strategy against Iran, against China"—then it misses the point that, by intervening in this way, we're actually making it much more difficult for Islamic reformers. Because, time and again, they and their populations see the West intervening in a very heavy-handed, clumsy, and often bullying way. And of course, all that does is play into the hands of the fundamentalists—into the hands of those who want no reform whatsoever and see reform as the problem, not the solution.

My strong view is that we've really got to think again—think much more strategically, and perhaps in a grand strategic way. Maybe think about the sort of approach George Kennan used with containment, but make it much more about laissez-faire and about not intervening. It's difficult sometimes not to intervene, and certainly, when I was in Afghanistan, I remember being at dinner with a few people, including two Afghan women politicians. They were extremely keen on Western intervention because it allowed them to shift the whole conversation about what was going on and to fight against the Taliban, who are fairly misogynistic, frankly.

But the problem is that to do that, you've got to intervene with the understanding that it'll only work—if it ever could work, which I don't think it can—only if you're prepared to do it for generations. You know, are you prepared to intervene in a country for 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 years? And there's no appetite to do that. So we've got to accept that, even though we might not like how a regime works, the first thing to work out is that if we do seek to intervene in the way this appears to be happening, there's a strong likelihood we're going to make things worse rather than better. I can't think of a single intervention in the last 25 years where we've done anything other than make things worse rather than better. But tell me if you think I'm wrong.

#Glenn

No, no, I think you're correct, indeed. And again, even if the outcome—what one wants to achieve—even if that's not the main focus, you still need some strategic thinking. You used the word “clumsy,” and I think that’s very accurate. I mean, from my perspective, I would have preferred a path with Iran where we could have some mutual understanding, make some peaceful settlement, because we never really did that over the past 47 years. And if it doesn’t work, one can use some form of containment. But that’s my view. Others might take a different view—that it’s not possible to have peace with Iran, that it has to be defeated and destroyed. Well, if that’s the perspective... well, not fair enough, but at least you still need strategic thinking.

Then the whole rhetoric—you know, “We can’t allow Ayatollahs with nuclear weapons,” and “All the Iranian people want is to be free of them.” If we just shake up the regime a bit, it’ll fall apart, and then the people will take to the streets and welcome us as liberators. It’s just so much nonsense, hope, and wishful thinking. Whether one wants to find peace with Iran or destroy it, at least there has to be some honest assessment here. I listen to the politicians, at least in this country, and the media—it’s all just emotional, ideological sloganeering. There’s nothing there. It doesn’t surprise me that we keep making these stupid mistakes over and over again, war after war, because it’s detached from reality.

#Guest

Well, as you know, I wrote a book. Again, it's not a plug for the book because it's out of print, but I wrote a book called *Strategy for Action*. I wrote it for just this reason, Glenn, because I wrote it in 2011. By that time, I had been closely associated with the Iraq War, visiting Iraq a number of times, and I’d also been deployed in the Afghan War. And I realized that we just can’t do strategy in the West anymore—we’re really bad at it. I don’t mean that if we had done strategy, we would have won those wars, but rather something much more profound: if we had done proper strategic analysis, we wouldn’t have engaged in those wars in the first place.

And this is what I feel with the Syrian interventions, the Libyan interventions, and with this one as well. We didn’t do proper strategic analysis or really think them through—really work hard to understand these countries with specialists. So many of the specialists have been lost. I remember going into Afghanistan; we had hardly any Farsi speakers and hardly any Pashtun speakers. All that expertise that used to be there in the West, when we were much better engaged, was lost. And so was the understanding of how these countries think.

But I think if we had done that in others, we wouldn’t have done it in the first place. And that, to me, comes back to Clausewitz. You know, Clausewitz said that anybody involved in a war must first understand the nature of that war. And we haven’t understood the nature of the wars in any of these interventions, I’m afraid. That’s part of the whole problem of thinking again. I think, as I said, André Beaufre—you know, the loser deserves to lose. We deserved to lose those wars because we never thought them through in the first place. So it sounds to me like we’re in violent agreement.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, this is why I often like to sit down and talk with more senior people who have a background in the intelligence services—because they don't hate their opponents. They want to understand them. They can appreciate their culture. It doesn't matter if they were fighting against the Soviets; they nonetheless respected their opponent. Because once you take an interest and have some respect, as opposed to hating, then you can assess what the possibilities are—to make peace, to harmonize interests—and if that's not possible, how can we defeat them?

I mean, when you go in with this mentality that they're inferior, horrible, evil—there's no way to either make peace or have a realistic plan for winning. So, no, I find it completely exhausting to listen to this political class that dominates. It's horrific. But let me ask you one last question: what do you think is the likely outcome of this war—the U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran? Do you think they'll fail?

#Guest

I would say 30–70. It's by no means clear, but I mean 30% chance of success and 70% chance of failure. I was surprised that air superiority seems to have been achieved earlier than I expected—not completely surprised, but a bit. But again, I come back to this fundamental point: it's very difficult to achieve regime change if you don't have boots on the ground. There will never be a significant number of American or Israeli boots on the ground. So if you measure success against the objective of regime change, then I think it will fail. What I could imagine, though, is that when we get to day 30 and it hasn't fallen, there might be something like—well, a bit like the successful withdrawal from the Red Sea operations against the Houthis—where there's a sort of reconstruction of the objectives that suits U.S. purposes. Something like, "OK, well, we've written down the bombardment forces."

We've written down the nuclear forces. We're now happy to stand back from this and let the Iranians undertake their own regime change. I'm sure most people will see through it, but it's the way I could imagine this going if, by day 30—by the end of this month—the primary objective hasn't been achieved. In that case, it's a success for the Iranians, because, of course, they simply need to survive to call it a success, rather than defeat the Americans and the Israelis. So that would be my first guess. I'd be curious, though, to see what you think as well.

#Glenn

But I think Trump can walk it back to some extent, because I'm looking back at the 12-day war when they attacked Iran in June. And, you know, at that point he was making comments like, "We will only accept unconditional surrender." That was not forthcoming. But then afterwards he just said, "Well, we bombed their nuclear facilities. They've been obliterated. They can't restore them. Victory." So you redefine your victory, and then you can go home and pretend as if you won. I think they did something similar with Yemen. That's a strength, because often countries look for off-ramps.

So, you know, I think his BS can be his strength in this regard. He's changed the definition of victory before, so he can do it again. I think it's possible. If this drags on for a few weeks, they're running dry on their weaponry, and the Iranians are causing too much destruction for them and their allies, then I can see Trump saying, "Well, we destroyed so many of their factories where they're building these missiles. Their ballistic missile capability has been set back for decades, and victory is ours. Now we'll put an end to this and go home." So that's not unthinkable.

So I think, well, if I had to bet, that's probably the direction we'd go. But the idea that the Iranians would make any real concessions—I don't see it, because what the Americans wanted was essentially for Iran to capitulate, to give up its deterrents. But if it didn't have the ballistic missiles and drones, then it would be finished. They could just bomb it to the ground. So, no, I don't know. This is what I expect. Because it's an existential threat for the Iranians, I don't see how they're willing—or how they're going to accept—anything other than for the Americans to eventually pull away.

#Guest

Yeah, I think it may not be existential for the United States. It clearly isn't existential in terms of the war for the U.S. It may be existential for Israel, but I think it's very possibly existential for the Trump presidency. Because if they do pull back and head into the midterms in a way that begins to look like it's just a redefinition of victory, I'd be interested to see how many Republicans actually stay the course in backing Trump as they go into the midterms. It'll be interesting to see whether Congress might actually go back to the War Powers Act and start acting against Trump. I don't know—but it could be existential for the Trump presidency. We'll see. They'll need to be pretty fleet-footed to persuade people that this really is a victory by redefining what the objectives of the war were in the first place. But let's see.

#Glenn

Well, thanks for coming on and sharing your insights. We'll see how—yeah, we'll revisit this, see how it plays out. But I just don't think the objectives the Americans set out in this war are achievable. Well, they are achievable, but I don't... it's possible, but I don't think it's probable. However, I could be wrong, so...

#Guest

Yeah, me too, Glenn. But anyway, keep up the good work. It really matters. We need this independent analysis—it's so important.

#Glenn

Thank you.

