

# Alastair Crooke: Iran's Strategy - Evict the U.S. from the Middle East

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat and the Founder of "Conflicts Forum" based in Beirut. He was formerly an advisor on Middle East issues to Javier Solana, the EU Foreign Policy Chief. Crooke outlines Iran's strategy for its retaliatory strikes - how to exhaust the US and expel it from the Middle East. Follow the Substack of Alastair Crooke: <https://conflictsforum.substack.com/> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](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/gdieseng](https://buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng) Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

## #Glenn

Welcome back. We're joined today by Alistair Crooke, a former British diplomat and negotiator who worked for decades on conflicts in the Middle East. He's also the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum. Make sure to read his Substack — I'll leave the link in the description. Thank you very much for coming back on; it's always a pleasure.

## #Alastair Crooke

You don't have to ask — it's always a pleasure.

## #Glenn

Well, we're now deep into the third day of this war against Iran, and Iran is retaliating in a big way. If you look at Iran's strategy or structure, how do you read it? Do you see the retaliation as organized in phases, or is it more improvised? How do you make sense of it?

## #Alastair Crooke

Yes. I mean, there are two sort of separate components to it. The first component, largely because of the array of missiles they have in their possession, was always going to be—first of all, and I think I may have said this to you before—the main focus was going to be on American bases in the Persian Gulf, in the Gulf area. And the reason I say it depends on the array is because those targets can be reached. They have a large stock of drones, a big stock of drones, and short-range missiles—missiles that can't reach, or can't easily reach, Israel. So it made sense, if you like, to focus to begin with on the Gulf, on the American bases.

Ali Larijani has emphasized again that this is not an attack on the Gulf states per se, but on the American bases and CIA facilities that take advantage of the Gulf states to pursue their conflict against Iran. So that was one element. The second element is likely related, and it seems to have three phases. The first component of this is attacking the radar systems—the radar systems, the AEGIS systems—that allow America and Israel to see into Iraq. And they've done that, taking out major radar bases in Gulf states, in Qatar and in other places, in Bahrain too.

I think—I can't remember exactly—but they've taken out a large number of major radar sites belonging to the Americans in the Gulf states. So the first exercise is focused on the radar, which also incapacitates, or at least limits, Israeli missile systems. And there are a lot of them. The second phase is to continue using older missiles and drones to draw out and deplete the Israeli air defense intercept capability—to wear it down, to reduce it to the minimum. And you can see that; I mean, it's pretty obvious. You've probably seen the videos, or anywhere you look you can see the videos of Israeli strikes into Tehran.

Although now they've moved faster into the higher, more sophisticated missiles in some cases. But you can see that—the Israelis are using huge numbers of intercepts against each single intrusion. I mean, you see easily eight, ten, twelve used against every arriving missile strike—and missing, mostly missing. So where we are now is at this sort of stage, stage three. The Gulf states have almost entirely exhausted their air deployment system. I mean, there are signs you can see: Iranian drones flying freely over Dubai and other sites.

They've used up all their air defenses. So now the Iranians can, at their leisure, keep destroying American bases—and they are, to a large extent. I think they're evacuating a number of bases. I don't know exactly which ones, but they're evacuating. And others, particularly in Bahrain, have suffered huge damage to the facilities of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. But going back to the phases—with Israel, the aim is to use older, slower missiles again to deplete their intercept capabilities, as in June.

And then the next phase—the next, you know, stage of the plan—is to move to the more modern, more sophisticated, and faster technology. I think they say—I'm not a military expert at all, not at all—but they say that the air defenses of Israel can't cope with anything above Mach 4. So anything faster than Mach 4 is not likely to be intercepted. And, of course, hypersonics move much faster, much higher, or much later. So eliminating those, reducing those, is the priority. And then the third stage that the Iranians have—and we don't know much about—is that they say they have new UAVs.

I think we've had a glimpse. I don't know if it's all of their new weapons, but we've now seen hypersonic missiles with multiple warheads arriving—or at least one. I don't know if there have been more than that. There have been new weapons, because we haven't seen them with cluster warheads before, to my knowledge at least. As I say, I'm not really a military nerd—I may be wrong—but I think I'm pretty much right about that. So that's essentially the plan. And the objective, ultimately, I think, is to drive the United States out of the Middle East, which is already underway.

I'm not sure that, you know, as things stand—if it continues this way—the United States will be able to maintain its presence in the Gulf states. I mean, they're being hammered by these drones and missiles. And I think the second element, of course, with Israel, is to degrade the Israeli military so that it can no longer really threaten Iran as it has done—to weaken it enough that it's no longer a threat to Iraq. I think the other objectives are to impose a price on the United States and on Europe—an economic price. And that economic price comes from the closing of the Strait of Hormuz. Well, it's not entirely closed, of course.

I mean, what they're doing is allowing vessels from states that haven't been complicit in the attack on Iran to pass. Chinese vessels, for example, pass without hindrance—but not those of the United States, or from states associated with a large American base in the area. So the economic costs are an important element. And I think there's more to it. I mean, this is my own speculation—I have a God-knows-what portrait—but in the bigger geopolitical picture, we've seen how the United States is trying to take control of choke points, seaborne choke points, and to control the passage of tankers reaching both China and Russia by attacking and seizing tankers they claim are part of the shadow fleet of Russia or China, or that are sanctioned in connection with Venezuela.

Chinese vessels sanctioned in connection with—I mean, what the legal position of that is, is beyond me. I mean, there's no Security Council resolution. You know, this is just, again, the United States stating it and doing it willy-nilly, without any sort of legal basis. I can't see on what grounds America can claim the legal right to seize Chinese vessels at sea, but they do. So I think, in this context, what we're seeing is perhaps a retaking of some of the, if you like, energy infrastructure—the energy infrastructure of the Persian Gulf, and perhaps also that whole West Asian area.

Taking it back, first of all, under Iranian control—or more broadly, under BRICS control. So I think it's also an element in maneuvering, reorganizing, and countering the American attempt to dominate oil and gas corridors, by showing that the BRICS are going to dominate some of those corridors—of course, only in this geography. So I think, yes, pain is going to be a very important element, and you can already see it in gas prices, because it's not just oil. I mean, gas—LNG from Qatar and so on—has been a star. And gas prices for Europe have already, I don't know what they are at this very moment, but they've shot up by about 40% overnight and well over the weekend.

Oil prices are up substantially, and markets are crashing quite widely. So there's a big economic cost as well as a political cost to losing the basis of that. I do think also—I don't quite know how you'd term it or how you'd put a cost on it—but I don't think the Gulf states will ever be the same again. You know, they had a certain, well, we called it a kind of Gulf brand, which was markets, AI, hotels, tourism, fun—the easy life. And airlines, and revenue from airlines, were a major contribution to Gulf prosperity. I think this is a change. I don't think we'll see the same again, because we'll be getting phone calls from people in Dubai saying, “Oh, get out.”

**#Glenn**

We want to get out.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

You know, trying to take taxis across the six-hour desert drive to Oman to catch a flight—I don't know if they got their flight, but anyway, that is, I mean, you know... Some people will stay, of course, but a lot of security-conscious Europeans, I think, will probably move on or take employment somewhere else if they can. So I think that's changing. I think also the question is what happens to the wealth, and how they're going to look at the future. I mean, the Iranians have said to them, "You've been attacked because you chose to facilitate Israel and the United States, and to have bases and CIA offices on your territory—in the case of Dubai, which has been attacked."

So, you know, do they then shift and move and decide they'd like to have a different relationship with Iran, and, you know, that they won't have American bases in the future? We'll have to see. I notice even the British have been warned by Greece that they're not allowed to use their base for anything but humanitarian reasons. They can't join in providing defense for Israel and the United States from Akrotiri base or their other base in Cyprus. So, I mean, I think that's not in itself serious, but it's harming them. Then the change might come, and people would say, well, if you're going to be here, it's not going to be for military or intelligence purposes.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

And so all of that—sorry, a long answer—but all of that seems to me to suggest a potential geopolitical shift.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

...is unfolding, and that is the intention. And of course, then we look at what might be the case—what will happen with Israel. And of course, it's too early to draw any real conclusions at this point. Then we look at the United States, and we can draw a few early conclusions, I think, from the headlines. Even today, they say that the administration is in near-panic mode and very worried. They think there's a risk of this whole exercise getting out of control. It is out of control, actually—definitely out of control. They say there's a risk of it getting out of control.

They don't want to see dead Americans coming back, and, you know, what are they going to do? It seems that American officials are scrambling to change again what the justification for this war was and who started it. Was it Iran that started it? Was it Israel? It wasn't us anyway—we didn't do it. So, you can see already, this is the problem. The first is a public relations, a presentation problem. And the second big problem is: how long will Israel's intercept capacity last? My guess is that by Friday, they may be in trouble.

## **#Glenn**

Well, on the American side, the strategy doesn't seem to be going as they had hoped. I was wondering how you interpret that.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

That's an understatement.

## **#Glenn**

Understatement, yeah. Well, the killing of Khamenei was... I was wondering how you see the significance here, because it appears that in the American calculation, they thought killing the highest religious authority in Iran would somehow liberate the people, that they'd take to the streets and celebrate their American liberators. I'm not sure exactly why this would trigger a regime change or what the calculations were. But how do you assess the killing of Khamenei—what it was, what they hoped it would achieve, and what is actually happening?

## **#Alastair Crooke**

An incredible error, if you take it on its own merits—what it was supposed to do. A complete error of judgment, which shows, you know, the sheer cognitive dissonance of not understanding who he was or what he meant at all, and just seeing him in the sort of crude terms of Trump calling him and his colleagues thugs and murderers. And so, what it has done has two things. It started a farce around the region—a real farce around the region. You've probably seen the massive protests over the weekend against the American embassy in Baghdad. The Green Zone is being stormed by protesters.

There were protesters attacking the consulate in Pakistan. In Bahrain, there may be the first regime change of this whole operation, because between 17 and 18 percent of Bahrain is Shia, and the ruling emir is Sunni. He's surrounded himself with a Sunni protective, defensive force. There have been massive protests, and they're trying to imprison Shia leaders and stop it. But they've already been, again, besieging Bahrain as a state with protests. And then you have this in Iraq, with the Quraishis attacking the American air defenses in Erbil and elsewhere.

He's really fired up everywhere, because he was either the first or the second—depends who you ask—most important Shia in the Middle East. Hugely significant as a religious leader, as a scholar and cleric. And they killed him—murdered him. He was killed in his office at work on Saturday morning. It's pretty clear to me that he actually chose this deliberately. I mean, of course he could have been in some protected place somewhere else. But as he himself said, "I'm 86, I'm semi-crippled. The only thing I possess is my dignity, and that comes from you. So my life is more significant in those circumstances." So I think he just stayed working. And he must have known, pretty clearly, given the sort of mentality of the Americans—and the Americans supporting Israel—and of Israel itself.

## **#Glenn**

They would surely come and try to kill him.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

And he thought maybe that was in the best interest of Iran. So I do think they've completely misunderstood. You open up a very important question, but one that's probably beyond this program to get into, which is: what are the roots of this hatred among those elements who were determined that the Supreme Leader would be killed? Why did they—why were they so vicious and vitriolic against him, and dancing in the streets at his death, not in Tehran but in Tel Aviv? You know, this has something to do with psychology and Western ways of thinking that would have to be explored a bit further. But there is something very deep about it.

Even when there was an Israeli journalist working for the 972 Magazine, she wrote about how she had put up a post about the killing of all those schoolgirls in a bomb attack that killed many, many children in Iran. And she was inundated with hate messages saying, "Good God, we're pleased." I mean, it's really—there's an ugly side to this sort of malicious animosity. Not that it doesn't exist in other parts of the world too, but it's very pronounced right now in this geography between Israel and Iran. Anyway, one of the messages that comes out of this, I think most clearly, is that we've all been told how wonderful Israeli intelligence is—how clever the Mossad is.

Technically, you know, when it comes to explosions and operations, maybe they are good. But when it comes to understanding the region, they've done really badly. Three times in this last period, they assumed that the whole of Iran was just waiting to erupt against the state, to take it over and turn it into a pro-Western, Pahlavist-style government. And, you know, I mean—do they not do due diligence on their analysis? It was so obvious they were off the mark. I don't think you experienced this sort of vicious anger against the Supreme Leader while you were there. I'd say it didn't happen at all. In fact, mostly they love him, and he's a highly respected person. He's very humble. I went to see his house at one point in Tehran—it's very modest. I think that's the one thing people would probably kill to protect, and I just don't know for sure.

## **#Glenn**

Very simple—very, very basic. A clean, empty house.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

I mean, he wasn't a pretentious man.

## **#Glenn**

Well, you mentioned that it seems the main Iranian strategy now is to push the United States out of the Middle East—by hitting its bases, causing some casualties, weakening the Gulf states, imposing a cost for hosting American bases, and going after economic interests. Of course, degrading Israel will be a key aspect. But I was wondering, to what extent might there be an unintentional—well, let's call it an achievement? How do you see this war impacting the relationship between the United States and Israel? Because there seems to be more tension in that relationship than there has been, at least in my lifetime.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

Oh, you make a very important and correct point. I mean, it is going to change this whole question. First of all, you know, the miscalculations I've just been describing—the idea that regime change was somehow likely. This was the third time, after there was a decapitation strike in June. Then there were the protests, where militant-trained insurgents were put in to give the impression of a collapsing state in January. And now again, they've killed and tried to carry out a second decapitation strike—not quite as extensive, but still a decapitation strike—including a senior leader, under the assumption that this would change the whole state and turn it into a pro-Israeli ally.

I mean, you know, it really is running the price. It's unbelievable what you see. You know—gosh, do you remember how a new world was supposed to be opening up before us, with the United States on our side, and that very soon we'd have a new coalition working with Israel—Israel alone—and a westernized Iran and India, taking on all the radical Islamists from both Shia and Sunni? I mean, fantasy. Really, fantasy. So yes, it is going to affect the United States, because I think Trump is not going to recover from this state. Even if he tries, I think it'll be very hard for him to find an exit—a quick exit, as he usually likes. You know? The Iranians are not open to negotiation.

I think our army is made back. Yeah, no thanks. No negotiation. So he'll find it hard to get out. And already, I think if you look at the American press, you see many of those in the Pentagon now trying to say, well, you know, we warned him—trying to avoid blame or the retribution that might come from what will be a humiliating, you know, exit from the Gulf. They're already throwing the leadership under the bus, saying, well, we did tell him. We told him. We told him we couldn't guarantee there would be regime change. We told him we couldn't guarantee there'd be no casualties.

We told him you can't guarantee a quick exit, the kind of move Trump liked. And we told him it wasn't going to be like Maduro in Venezuela. So already this is starting to come out. And yes, I think there are going to be political consequences. If you look at the MAGA reaction, they're strongly against the "Israel first" policy and what they see as Trump's betrayal of his repeated promises. He wasn't there to start wars; he was there to stop wars. No more forever wars. And, you know, it was only in—what was it—May? Or was it March? May or March, anyway, he was in Saudi Arabia, proclaiming the end of regime change. He said there would be no more.

That's over. That era failed. It wasn't successful. There will be no more. And he said that in Riyadh—there will be no more regime change. So I think there are going to be quite profound consequences in the United States on this, especially in my view. And the consequences could be very serious, because the popularity of this war was never high, even before we reached this point. It only had something like 21% support, I believe—at least the figures I saw showed about 21%. Of course, support was higher in the Republican Party. But the end of it is, you know, he's likely to lose the midterm election. I mean, of course, midterms—well, a week in politics is a long time, and this isn't until November.

His ratings and everything signal very clearly that he could lose the House. But if he loses the House and the Senate, then I think he risks impeachment or even imprisonment. So it's very serious from that point of view. And he recognized that—he said it. Literally, I'm quoting: he said, "You know, if we lose the House, I could be finished. But if we lose both houses, then I'll be in court, and I won't be pushing." Those were his words. So, you know, this carries weight. Now, people will say, "Oh yeah, but the Democrats will come back, and they'll make peace with the Israelis, and it'll be back to normal."

I mean, it certainly goes, but I see something different taking place. I see something slightly different in that I think even within the Democratic Party, people are saying, you know, we Democrats have to have a thorough discussion about the future relationship between the United States and Israel, and how they interact. Clearly, that hasn't happened yet. It would be wrong to try to guess what it's going to turn into, but I think even there, there's the sense that this will have to be radically reviewed—how exactly we, as the United States, relate to Israel. So yes, big changes.

## **#Glenn**

My last question is about whether there's any possibility of walking this back or putting an early end to the war. Because—well, first, let me say, regarding what you said about the Pentagon, I thought that was interesting. If, domestically, Trump wants to make this legal, I think he has to make the case that it was an imminent threat from Iran that he had to respond to. But when the Pentagon comes out and tells Congress there was no immediate or imminent threat from Iran, they're literally throwing him under the bus here. It's—well...

## **#Alastair Crooke**

And by the way, sorry to interrupt you—just quickly on that point—because they've even gone further. Now, I can't remember who it was, but I think in the Gang of Eight briefing—though I may be wrong—when questioned, American officials said, "No, we have no assessment that Iran would preemptively attack Israel." There's no assessment that they would preemptively—of course, there was no assessment of that as any threat to the United States. But they specifically said in that

briefing, and it's been reported, that there was no intelligence or assessment suggesting they would attack us. And quite clearly, you know, the attack by Israel had been talked about at the end of the year and agreed upon.

And even the timing—Washington agreed at that meeting in Mar-a-Lago on the 29th of December. So, I mean, you know, the legal basis of the action is on very, very shaky ground. And, you know, the language coming out—like from, I think it was Rubio—saying, “Oh yes, it's absolutely right, they're building ICBMs, they've threatened the United States.” I mean, I don't think even in the sort of heightened atmosphere of politics today in the United States anyone believes that. And certainly there's no evidence of it, or none that can be produced. So I think that, yes, the legal grounds are indeed very shaky. And that's why I say, you know, the difficulty is he has not sought permission from Congress, and he has taken the initiative to kill a head of state.

We're talking about congressional consultation. I mean, I think the—well, I can't remember the exact term—but generally, the so-called “Gang of Eight” are the key congressional leaders in the United States, from both the House and the Senate. The leaders of each chamber, and so on—the eight most senior institutional figures—get special classified briefings that aren't available to other members of Congress. And it was from that, as I understood it, that these comments came. So he's on shaky ground, which could easily provide—well, if they can't find a better reason—it could determine whether it proceeds or not, whether it's turned down or not. But it would pretty much form the basis for an inquiry.

## **#Glenn**

But it seems, based on the previous conflicts over the past year, that Trump's main approach is—well, he sees the weakness and relative decline of America as being caused by weakness. And he sees this in leaders such as Biden and Obama. So the idea is to have a show of strength: go in, don't get drawn in over too long a period of time. A quick victory—ideally, regime change in Iran.

But of course, you're going to walk away with some other trophy eventually—to, you know, give him credibility at home, but also to, I guess, strike some fear into other adversaries on the international stage. This would be ideal, but it's not playing out as he had hoped. And I think the longer this goes on, the more the advantage shifts to Iran, in terms of being able to absorb these different blows and being able to dish it out. But I've heard some comments now that—at least, I expected if Trump wanted to put an end to this—he would make statements like, “Well, the Iranians want to talk, you know, they're coming to the table,” something along those lines to make it... well, he said that.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

He just said that, I mean, you know, the Iranians want to talk, and they got, you know, held to their word by the Iranians when the Italians brokered a ceasefire.

## **#Glenn**

But what does this mean, then? If Trump wants to put an end to this war, is that even possible? Do you think the Iranians would let that happen, or do they have other objectives they want to achieve before they're willing to let Trump walk this back?

## **#Alastair Crooke**

No, they won't. They won't help him out. I mean, first of all, he's deceived them twice. And there's a long history of deception, because the killing of Qasem Soleimani was a deception. He was coming—he'd been invited, it had all been set up. And of course, the Americans knew about it; it was supposed to be a discussion about peaceful relations with Iran. I think it was Saudi Arabia or somewhere like that where it was going to take place. He was there on an official visit, coming on a commercial airline, and he was killed by a missile as the Iranian official delegation was waiting for the meeting. So, I mean, deception after deception, leaving the Iranians wondering how they should even respond.

And I think, you know, they know they're in the driving seat. I mean, there are, you know, factory sites and things that are important but that people maybe aren't seeing very much. But it's not going well. I mean, I talked about interceptors, but there are only a limited number of Tomahawks. You know, we keep hearing talk about how Tehran is being bombed badly. It's like, well, when people talk about being bombed, they imagine aircraft going over and dropping bombs. That's not what's been happening. There's no evidence of Israeli aircraft in Iranian airspace at all. And in fact, what we've actually seen are signs of aircraft being shot down.

One could have been in Iranian airspace, but three may have been taking off from Kuwait and were locked on by Israeli F-15s and shot down. They say it was friendly fire, but friendly fire for three aircraft taking off at the same time, when they don't have many aircraft? I don't know. Anyway, there are no visible signs up to now, despite Defense Minister Katz saying, "We're going to have a corridor. We've got air superiority, dominance of the skies across Tehran. We can fly where we want." And actually, all the evidence points to the opposite—that they cannot fly because they're frightened.

And obviously things have changed in the last seven months because Iran seems—well, I mean, just take the evidence of drones. All 22 drones that have been flown over—pilotless drones, of course—into Iranian airspace have all been shot down, pictures showing them being destroyed by the Iranians. So something is working, and working quite well. These are some of the most advanced drones that the United States and Israel have. So this means, you know, Iran feels pretty confident in its position. Yes, of course, it's paying a certain price—so is Israel—but they're quite confident they're changing the geopolitics of West Asia, of the Gulf states.

And so if you say to me, “Just start diplomacy again,” come on—you know, they’ve been through this twice. Every time they sit down with, or are about to sit down with, the Americans, they get attacked. I think this is going to have wider repercussions on the Russia–Ukraine talks. I mean, what’s the point of talking while being trumped? I’m not saying that won’t happen, but it’s going to make people reflect carefully on the whole approach there. What would they take? Well, I have no idea—and I’m not saying that based on any inside information—but I’d say anything less than a complete lifting of sanctions and tariffs, and the return of all the Iranian frozen funds, in total, all at once... now, they might consider that.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, well, I can understand why the Iranians wouldn’t want to simply put an end to the fighting and then wait a few more months for the next attack or the next stage of a revolution. So I guess shifting realities on the ground—pushing the Americans back, or ideally out of the region, or getting some proper diplomatic victory—that’s just going to be very hard for the Americans to swallow after 35 years of hegemony and being able to dictate all outcomes. And, yeah, to simply accept this... yeah, I’m curious.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

You know, there is a certain risk in this. I mean, I don’t think they anticipated what’s happened in the Gulf. I don’t think they thought this was even a possibility beforehand, so they’re shocked. And, you know, people can do dangerous or unwise things when they’re desperate and feel they’ll otherwise be humiliated. So, of course—but what we’re talking about then is slipping into a territory where it’s not really sensible to speculate, because it’s not possible to speculate sensibly.

## **#Glenn**

Well, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule. I appreciate you sharing your insights.

## **#Alastair Crooke**

My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me to the program.