

No Escape For USA: The Iran Endgame | Prof. Michael Brenner

The next US war of choice is laying bare the terminal stage of the kleptocratic system that has killed 38 million people since the early 1970s. Like a balloon that expands until a single needle pierces its mighty but soft skin, the future of the Western imperial system hinges on its ability to either deflate in grace or go down in a very big bang. Today, I'm talking again to Dr. Michael Brenner, emeritus professor of international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Links: Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic> Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:38 American power and the road to Iran 00:08:53 Channel note and Substack 00:09:10 Trump and the long elite consensus 00:20:23 Israel and US strategic overlap 00:31:54 Western racism and imperial culture 00:48:06 Collapse of limits in Western politics 00:53:14 Trump and the Iran war endgame

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. I'm Pascal Lottaz, an associate professor at Kyoto University. Today I'm joined again by Dr. Michael Brenner, an emeritus professor of international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Michael, welcome back to the channel.

#Michael Brenner

Well, I'm very pleased to be back with you, Pascal. I'm somewhat envious of you—living in Japan and getting to enjoy the cherry blossoms soon. We don't have any of those here in Texas.

#Pascal

Well, the cherry blossoms will bloom soon. But before that, we've unfortunately had this tragedy with Iran. And by tragedy, I mean an open violation of international law and a war of aggression by the United States. You and I talked about this before—you gave me a wonderful rundown of the history of the neoconservative movement. It seems the neocons have once again won the day in the United States. Could you give me your analysis of where this war is coming from and what your view of the situation is?

#Michael Brenner

Look, there are some cardinal truths that unfortunately get obscured in this cacophony of voices—voices both spoken and written—which focus, for the most part, on immediate details or idle

speculation. I think the first thing to say is that the United States, under Donald Trump, has not really altered the fundamental direction of American foreign policy. What he's done is change the mode, making it more audacious, more willing to take risks, more aggressive, and with an even greater emphasis on coercive means—whether those means are military, as is happening now in Iran, or commercial and financial. His great tariff war against all trading partners began within, what was it, forty-five days of his taking office.

And that gave us a very clear indication of both the thinking of the president—such as it is—and his senior associates, as well as the extreme measures to which he was prepared to resort. That said, I think we should bear in mind that there is a remarkably comprehensive underlying consensus in the United States among, well, let's say, members of the foreign policy community or the political elites and political class generally. It was first really articulated more than thirty years ago, right at the end of the Cold War, in that famous—or you might say infamous—memorandum that laid out in detail a strategy for the United States to establish its dominance, in fact its hegemony in a literal sense, at relatively little cost, and the means and methods to institutionalize it.

And that included taking preemptive action against any other power, any other state, that one could even imagine acquiring the strength to challenge the United States. And this was global. That was expressed in a phrase used by the Pentagon in various strategic documents, talking about maintaining escalation dominance in every region of the world—by which they meant not just literal military dominance, but that American views and interests should hold sway wherever they were identified as such. Now, that 1992 document, in effect, expressed views that were held by relatively few people. It was repudiated, in fact, by President Bush the elder and by his administration. But it did represent the thinking of a willful core of individuals—officials, former officials, think tankers, academics.

And what has happened over the ensuing—well, now thirty-five years—but I think the dialogue we had earlier explained exactly when and why in a moment, is that the essential precepts and assumptions of that Wolfowitz memo—it was Paul Wolfowitz who authored it—crystallized and became the foundational and consensual view of Americanism, or of the American political elite, because of 9/11. 9/11 had some very basic, serious, and enduring effects. One, it exposed for the first time—maybe since Pearl Harbor, if you like—American vulnerability, at a time when it was almost universally believed that the United States had acquired a sort of invulnerability with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And don't forget, back in the '90s—let's say 2001—China did not yet loom as a kind of systemic challenger to the United States, as it became 10, 15, 20 years later. So it was a real shock to the American people, to the American system. And one of the effects it had was that it refocused and re-energized interest and concern about how the United States could use its overwhelming vectors of force to, in effect, achieve the world-forward subjective goals of institutionalizing American dominance and control over the most essential aspects of international affairs. It also justified a very high level of intervention that was explained and presented in terms of the war on terror.

Of course, there was a war on terror, but what should have been, in effect, a series of police and intelligence missions and operations became instead an endorsement for the United States to flex its muscle in regions of interest to it. And that's how we got the Iraq War, as we all know. I mean, that was based on a crude set of lies. Saddam had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11. In fact, the jihadi groups were his bitter enemies. He was an enemy of them, and he and Osama bin Laden had a personal, deeply hostile relationship.

#Pascal

Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

#Michael Brenner

Yeah, and so I think we have to understand this background and the context it created. It gave the impetus—you might think of it as the theistic impetus—to a policy of increasingly expansive, extended, and intense applications of American power around the world.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's in the description below. And now, back to the video.

#Michael Brenner

Don't forget who came after Barack Obama, to whom the torch of American leadership was passed by George W. Bush, the younger—the one who sent American troops into Syria. It was Obama who introduced the idea of drone strikes against individuals identified as enemies of the United States, supposedly terrorist leaders, the definition of which was greatly expanded. It was Barack Obama who involved the United States in the Saudi Arabian assault on Yemen. Without direct American involvement—not just in terms of intelligence, but also in providing aircraft to refuel Saudi attack planes—the assault, which went on for, what, four or five years against the Houthis in Yemen, would have been technically and physically impossible. And the casualties from that campaign, which never got much attention, were in the hundreds of thousands.

And that's been attested to by various independent agencies, organizations, the United Nations, and so on. That includes a couple hundred thousand children who died from disease and starvation because of the blockade in which we participated. I mention that less because of its inherent strategic importance, but because it demonstrated the extent to which American leaders of all stripes were prepared to act aggressively on the international scene. So that's the context. That helps to—well, let me make an important point here. If one were to extract from the original Wolfowitz

memorandum a set of propositions—I've done that in a paper I wrote some time ago—and then set them alongside what appear to be manifestly...

The proposition is accepted—manifestly but implicitly—by Donald Trump, because Donald Trump is incapable of fashioning a doctrine or organizing his thoughts coherently. But if you were to place one set of basic propositions against the others, they're identical. That's why all the optimistic views expressed when he burst onto the scene in 2017, and then again when he returned to office a year ago—about Trump being opposed to deep-state interventionism, that there was a streak in the man that was considerate and wanted to present himself as a peacemaker, and so on—were never based on any firm foundation or evidence, except for a few rhetorical remarks he made during the campaign, which people took at face value, even though they were contrary to everything the man had done, said, and shown in his personality over the course of a lifetime.

And that's the background. It's also the context, which explains the passivity with which the American political class and the media have reacted—or not reacted—to the increasingly, sort of, you know, aggressive moves by Trump, or which have occurred as we aligned ourselves within a short period of 13 months. And let's underscore and highlight the extremity of those actions, right? Some began under Biden, some were initiated by Trump himself. There was participation in the Gaza genocide—no small thing.

#Pascal

Yes.

#Michael Brenner

There was a trade war against everyone—a tariff war against everyone from Lesotho to China—which was not only ill-considered, it wasn't even thought through. It was impulsive.

#Pascal

Right.

#Michael Brenner

It came out of Trump's gut and the warped minds of some of his advisers, like Mr. Besson, Navarro, and a few others. And then we've gone on at an accelerated pace—the Anschluss in Venezuela, the all-out economic war against Cuba, the aborted Greenland land grab, and on Ukraine, despite all the ballyhooed talk and broadcasting of Trump's supposed inclination to mediate a peace. How can you mediate a peace, by the way, in which you are, in effect, one of the protagonists, right?

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Michael Brenner

But as has been shown, Trump was unwilling and unable to do the most elementary things necessary to come up with terms of a settlement that would even minimally satisfy the concerns and interests laid out by the Russians and stated repeatedly. For example, in its most coherent and succinct form, by Vladimir Putin in his June 14th, 2024 speech. Now, none of these bellicose actions or declarations elicited any serious opposition in the United States at any level. And this is a reflection of two things. One, as we said a moment ago, is the fact that the fundamental premises underlying it—although not visible through the fog of Trump’s rhetoric—were held by nearly the whole of the American political class. So the fundamentals were in place and agreed upon. And that, of course, held for the media as well.

And the second factor, which explains how all of these things could be done without really stirring much debate or even serious discussion, was Trump’s ability to intimidate compliant parties—whether it be allies in Europe, the feeble political opposition, the Democratic Party, which shared, again, as I said, most of the aims and purposes that Trump was pursuing—and certainly the media, which has gone along with almost everything he’s done. That brings us to the present moment and the assault on Iran, right? There is hardly a newspaper, much less a television newsroom, that hasn’t, in one way or another, deferred to the president—and in most cases, not just most but a very large majority of cases, treated it as something that had to be done and that we hope is going to succeed.

Now, there is some criticism because this action isn’t popular enough among the American public. Sixty-seven percent of Americans opposed the attack on Iran—that’s dropped to about sixty percent now, a very mild “rally around the flag” phenomenon. So political opponents saw some opportunity and advantage there. For that reason, mainly—although some did have genuine concerns about the dangers and risks of war—that encouraged politicians to express criticism. You know, that’s a rather, you might say, cynical explanation, but I think it provides a good part of the evidence, a good part of the explanation. I’ve gone on a bit long-winded, Pascal, for which I beg your pardon, and perhaps we can now begin to narrow this and focus on what’s going on in Iran under Persian rule.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, I mean, this is very, very important. I think the point you're making is essential, right? You're saying this is not just Donald Trump’s war. This is not the action of one man. This is the outcome of many, many decades of consistent foreign policy agreement within the elite circles of U. S. foreign policy—the U.S. foreign policy club, right? It’s not just a crazy president who now uses extraordinary powers, although he also does kind of flout the Constitution and so on. And this

particular case is unique; it's part of a string of actions that has not only been predicted but planned for, and it's very much in character. Can you tell me then—because, you know, there are currently two broad schools of thought out there—

One view says the United States is basically at the strings of Israel—of Benjamin Netanyahu—who's been playing Donald Trump, and really the U.S., for the longest time, like a fiddle. On the other hand, there are people, especially Brian Berletic, who say that's not true. They argue the United States is using Israel as a convenient excuse to implement exactly that—to implement the Wolfowitz doctrine, to carry out what's coming out of the RAND Corporation, and so on—to pursue this hegemonic strategy. In that view, Israel is just the linchpin of one of three or four theaters, in this case, of course, the Middle East or West Asia. Which of these schools do you think is the most accurate?

#Michael Brenner

Well, I think that's an excellent point, Pascal, and an essential question to ask. From the perspective we have now, there's definitely a convergence of Israel's own ambitions—to create a greater Israel—and an American desire to control, dominate, an area that was considered both economically and strategically vital. Why strategically? Well, that's a bit of a slippery question, because nobody else was in a position to control it or to use their dominance against the U.S. I mean, it's a Cold War notion that has had no roots in reality for the past 30 years. But from, you know, the Wolfowitz framework, which has been assimilated by American political elites, it made sense, because this is a very important region. So they're central to an American global strategy of complete dominance and control.

Uh, the perverse relationship between Israel and the United States—between Israeli elites and American elites—the strength of the Israeli lobby in the United States, the personal relations between Netanyahu and Trump, it all had a very distinctive sort of flavor to it. And it's quite important in the overall picture. But I think underlying that relationship was a convergence, as I said, of the ambitions of both parties. Both countries were led by very willful people who each had a grandiose and inflated view of their goals, ambitions, and objectives. And in the case of Trump, there was this sort of primitive optimism that whatever he willed, he could accomplish.

So, you know, from a historical perspective, I don't think the particular events of the last three or four years—going back to the Biden era, Gaza, and so forth—were absolutely unavoidable. You did have 9/11, which provided a great spur to Netanyahu to pursue his own ambitions and had a tremendous impact in the United States. Similarly, an American president other than Trump might not have so cavalierly committed the United States to such drastic actions as what has come down to the present—like launching an attack on Iran, which was utterly senseless and extremely dangerous. That said, even though there was no inevitability, the strategic logic was in place and therefore permissive of this, even if the immediate factors were supplied by the character and personalities of Netanyahu and Trump.

#Pascal

So, in a way, you could say that the goals of these two entities—Israel and the United States—are different, but the means are the same. Hence, they create a kind of symbiosis, much like how Jewish Zionists and Christian Zionists have different goals in mind. The Jewish Zionists want Jewish rule over the rest, while the Christian Zionists want Armageddon, where the Jews go to hell and the Christians go to heaven. Different goals, but achieved through the same means. So they cooperate—joined at the hip, as John Mearsheimer would say.

#Michael Brenner

Yeah, I mean, that's true.

#Michael Brenner

I mean, these are—

#Michael Brenner

Intangibles that are difficult to pin down. But in my view, they're extremely important, because the psychology—or the psychopathologies—at work deviate at acute angles.

#Pascal

Mm-hmm.

#Michael Brenner

I probably should say "obtuse angles," right? From standard historical practice, from the norms of international behavior, it's only madmen—mad regimes—that have followed the course Netanyahu and Trump have taken. It's hard to find historical precedents among states, governments, or leaders we might see as more conventional, more normal in their conduct. You know, it's always dangerous to look into the psychology of individuals and try to explain major events strictly in those terms, but it's also dangerous to ignore that. Yeah, I mean, this comes back to whenever, or whoever—when an elected president of a sovereign country who posed no threat, was not engaged in any serious conflict with, in this case, the United States and President Maduro—to turn a blind eye to genocide when there is no historical basis or experience for the United States, and for Americans, to act as accomplices in it.

The Israelis—given the history and the indoctrination they've received in school and elsewhere—live in a different socio-psychological and political setting than the United States. After all, those primordial passions don't exist in the U.S. Even among modern, you know, Jewish populations, which

for the most part supported Israel and the Israel-Zionist lobby, most American Jews are secular and certainly were not inflamed with those kinds of passions. So there's really no precedent for many of these world-changing—literally world-changing—events, decisions, and developments, which really force us to stretch our minds in search of explanations.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, that's what we're trying to do, right? We're trying to wrap our minds around the mechanisms through which these travesties over the past decades have been happening, right? These large-scale wars—and not only the wars, but also, let's not forget, a recent *Lancet* study showed that U.S. and EU sanctions kill half a million people every single year. Half a million people die just from sanctions. I mean, the mass violence unleashed by the West—not only the United States, but the way the entire system works—is tremendous, right? So how, why, and how does it happen?

And when we ask about the culpability of individual leaders, we ask this old question, right? Would the Second World War have happened if Hitler hadn't been there—if he'd been shot in the First World War? Would it have happened? But the answer seems to be, more and more, no. It's a system. The system produces the figureheads who carry out what the system is geared toward. Now, the question of how this system works is, of course, about how closely, or how deeply, the integration between Israel and the United States functions, because we clearly have influence in both directions. We see it every single time Netanyahu visits the United States.

We see it in the statements of the U.S. ambassador to Israel, who's also a very strong Christian Zionist. So the question is, what kind of framing is most useful to understand this? Previously, I had someone argue—or we came to the conclusion—that Israel might be best understood as an unshackled version of the United States, without the restraints of the Constitution. It allows for the implementation of things that wouldn't be possible otherwise. Hence, the synergy between the two entities, and also the political integration through lobbying and so on. How do you try to understand this interaction?

#Michael Brenner

Well, maybe it's helpful. We're concentrating on the United States, and there are some uniquely American elements—the privileges that Americans accord themselves as a country, and that American leaders accord the U.S. government. You know, they're rooted in this native belief that, in some form or another, permeates American culture and society: that the United States was born in a condition of original virtue. There's some theology at work in that—the idea that the United States was put here, for some by providence, for others by history, to be the beacon, to show the path toward a better, more enlightened world, and increasingly, as an agent, to take initiatives to move along that path. That's very deep-seated.

It was first pointed out by Alexis de Tocqueville, almost 200 years ago. And I forget—I mean, Americans, the United States as a country, has two other distinctive historical features. One, not so distinctive, is that it always had the ambition to expand—manifest destiny. After all, the United States started a war with Mexico, a war of aggression designed to seize vast amounts of Mexican territory. We started with lies and misrepresentations—the Spanish-American War—taking us into colonial territory as far away as the Philippines. Think about it: what would the original American founding fathers have thought about such an enterprise? But it's there; it's a certain pattern of history. The second thing, uniquely American, is that the United States was never occupied or suffered the ravages of war.

#Pascal

Yes.

#Michael Brenner

It suffered casualties—World War I, World War II, substantial losses in Korea, about 50,000, and in Vietnam, around 60,000. But it never suffered that kind of humiliation.

#Michael Brenner

And just the kind of suffering that almost every other country in the world has—along with the American belief that it can do and succeed at enterprises that nobody else can even contemplate. But let's widen the scope and consider America's allies—the collective West—which means Europe, France, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the practical, pragmatic allies of the West, such as Japan and South Korea. There are some features they share. Let's remember that after our COVID years, and down to this day, European governments and European societies have endorsed the atrocities of the Israelis in Gaza and throughout occupied Palestine.

Leaders all raced to Jerusalem, not only to embrace that moment, but to give him a green light to do whatever he wanted. It was as if, to use a crude analogy, a bunch of Hell's Angels were racing to get in on a group rape event. And it's been sustained to this day, which is very, very odd, given the postwar history of Europe—particularly Western Europe—and the seeming institutionalization of enlightened values. Even today, the Europeans, you know, talk about promoting and exporting their values. Just today, or maybe yesterday, the European Parliament issued the first of its awards of merit to those who promote European values. Among the recipients was Zelensky, who received the highest order of award, Bono from the rock group U2, and a number of other dubious persons.

So there's a certain pathology here, a certain deviance from what we understood about postwar Europe, that has to be placed alongside the psychopathology and psychopathic behavior of the United States. But what explains it is not easy to say. Certain things they do have in common, and which, again, I think are permissive factors. One is a subtle—and not so subtle—form of racism.

Racism is a very nebulous and elusive concept. It has multiple dimensions and can take a wide range of diverse forms. But there is no doubt, on the basis of the evidence of the last few years, that the Western countries still have a deep-seated sense of superiority—righteous superiority—compared to other races. The elegance of religion is mixed in as well. You know what we need?

#Pascal

May I just—

#Michael Brenner

I don't think you can explain the attitude, Mahalia, toward the atrocities committed against the Palestinians—and the universal acceptance of them—without taking that into account. Or just one other point, in another sense: the American growing obsession with China as a rival for the number one spot, as if there were a throne in the world that has to be occupied by somebody, and that the United States believes itself, as we said, providentially destined to be seated on that throne. That obsession with China is not just pragmatic or practical. I think it's reasonable to say there's a racial element as well. These were not Germans. The Chinese are not Germans, not even Russians. They're a different race.

And that, subconsciously for most and consciously for some, gives a particular edge to the hostility toward China, which has done nothing to provoke the U.S. or the West, while we have done much to provoke them. Going back on a half-century agreement—agreed between Mao, Nixon, and Kissinger—on the fundamental truth that Taiwan is an integral part of China. And then, almost overnight, we say no. We want this island, seven or eight thousand miles away from us, not to be part of China, to be independent and under American control. I mean, that's really quite extraordinary. It is. And there are very few precedents, if any, for that. And there is an element of race, I think, associated with it. It is. And we should acknowledge it.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Michael Brenner

Of course, in the United States and in Europe, for somewhat different reasons, there's this deep-seated animosity and discriminatory thinking about Muslims. Yeah, and may I just add—you know, the United States goes back to those small terrorist incidents of the '80s and '90s, and then, of course, 9/11. In Europe, it has much to do with the assimilation issues of large Muslim populations from distant parts of the world—in Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, and so forth. The United States, of course, these days is more prone than anybody else to go to extremes. I'll give you one example, a local example here in Texas, where I'm a resident—for my sins of a lifetime. The

state government, whose senior officials and governor can rightly be called quasi-fascist, have tried to undermine the public school system by creating a system of vouchers.

In other words, this is an outgrowth of the charter school and private school movement. We can go into that thicket. Anyway, the voucher system means any family can take some public money and use it to pay tuition at a private school—any school system, no matter what. And, of course, Christian fundamentalists have been very keen on that and have been pushing it in Texas. Now, on grounds that are dubiously constitutional, it can also be used to pay tuition at sectarian religious schools—whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or whatever. But the executive order issued by our governor, now confirmed by his deputies, says that private schools with any association with Islam, in any form whatsoever, are excluded and precluded from even applying for certification and eligibility for those grants.

#Pascal

Hmm.

#Michael Brenner

You can't get more racist than that. Is this characteristic of all Americans? No. But I think the point to consider is that many things are now done in the United States by state governments, as well as the federal government, that would have been utterly unthinkable—what, 30 or 40 years ago? I mean, nobody could have done this at that time. Of course, it's probably eventually going to be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, despite its leanings toward and sympathies for Trump and the Christian right. But meanwhile, it's going to be enforced, and the judicial review process is going to take years.

#Pascal

Yes.

#Michael Brenner

And there are many things like that—I mean, look—things that are singular and unique in American experience.

#Pascal

When we talk about international relations, what we're trying to understand isn't necessarily the racism or violent inclinations of individuals. We're trying to understand it on a systemic level, right?

#Pascal

And what you're pointing out is that there is inherent systemic racism—not in the liberal “woke” sense, but in the sense of serious discrimination across centuries, actually. Let's not forget, the United States wouldn't exist if it weren't for the genocide of the Indigenous population in North America. Hawaii wouldn't be part of the United States, and so on. And Europe—as sorry as I am to say—but, you know, rape, plunder, and war are European values. The only thing we don't like is when they're turned against ourselves. So the only sin that's been acknowledged over the last hundred years is that the genocide of the Jews was not a good one, because they were part of our own society. But whenever a new war starts, we usually see these blatant racist statements—be it in Ukraine, when a CNN reporter says, “But these are not real refugees. They're blonde and blue-eyed.”

These are normal people. And he used that kind of wording, right? We see it with Gaza—when the 7th of October was described as a genocide several times all over the media, as the biggest dying of Jews since the Holocaust. And then, with 100,000 dead in Gaza, there's still a debate about whether this may be called a genocide or not. And people who use the word “genocide” in Germany—some of them are in court. They're being prosecuted for this kind of thing. So we see how these extremely mental, these extremely violent inclinations of Europeans, of Americans, manifest themselves, unfortunately, time and again in the way they approach their near and far abroad. And I wonder now, if we switch for the last 15 minutes or so to Iran—your analysis about the latest war with Iran. What is it really about? And how do you see it developing? Okay.

#Michael Brenner

I'm going to climb out on a limb and suggest an additional, related explanation or factor at work here. You know, why is it—the question you've put and we've been discussing—why is it inconceivable that an American president would have launched an attack on Iran? How is it inconceivable that a country like the United States—and let's set Europe aside for a moment—would become complicit in a modern-day genocide? These things could not have occurred, would not have occurred, 30, 40, 50 years ago. Who would have thought that—well, coming back to Europe—that West Europeans would follow a path first laid out by Hitler, to declare Ukrainians honorary—well, he said “honorary Aryans”—and collaborate with Ukrainian Nazis of the Bandera stripe, right?

Even while the Nazi occupation in Ukraine led to the slaughter of many Ukrainians, why were they blind—or turned a blind eye—to the fact that key units of the Ukrainian army wore Nazi insignia on their uniforms, or that the government was promoting, uh, the installation of statues to honor Bandera? And then, for the European Parliament to declare that, uh, Zelensky—who, in effect, has been, uh, how to put it, domesticated by those far-right elements—as a symbolic figure representing European values. So let me add one other ingredient, perhaps, based on my understanding of what's happening in the United States, but which seems to be spreading throughout the Western world.

And that is, as our societies have progressed, they've weakened their ties and lost their moral and economic moorings. In part, that's due to the fact that we've become cultures of nihilism. You know, in a nihilistic society, all kinds of norms—formal rules, informal ones, habitual ones—in other words,

the whole assembly of elements that create a collective superego—have greatly diminished in their influence over individual behavior. I think that's clearly the case in the United States. Almost everything is permitted, and you can excuse just about everything—to oneself or to others—because, in terms of the supreme self, the supreme ego, there are no limits left.

In the case of Donald Trump, the psychopathological narcissism, right? I think that's part of an explanation, or a background factor, which helps explain not just the initiation of some of these previously unacceptable actions and behaviors—because there always has to be a volitional act by some individual or group—but also the tolerance for it, the acceptance of it. And that's certainly changing. I think it's an expression of this much wider cultural phenomenon. But that's slippery stuff. Maybe we'd better not venture too far, or we might slip and fall into it—or into some business of that sort.

#Pascal

Let's not. Let's not. Let's keep the abyss for another discussion. Just in the last couple of minutes, your assessment of how the U.S. is approaching its war with Iran, and how you think Iran is approaching it from its side.

#Michael Brenner

Well, I mean, the most striking thing—apart from the audaciousness and the craziness of what they've done, the irrationality—is that there's no plan. There wasn't a plan. You know, as Chas Freeman points out, based on his vast experience and the academic and scholarly work he's done on decision-making, if you're going to behave logically and reasonably as the head of a government or a state—and particularly if what you're mulling over is the possibility of going to war—you begin by setting your objectives. Are there multiple objectives, and what's the priority scale? Two, do you have the means to achieve them—military, financial, political, domestically, and externally? And what means does your opponent have? And last, on what terms do you expect to end the war? None of this has been thought through or laid out by the Trump people. So they're completely at sea.

#Michael Brenner

You know, it's clear that these fantastic ideas about the Iranians rising up against the Islamic regime were always nonsensical, and anybody who knew anything about Iran realized that. It was a world of make-believe—a world of make-believe occupied by Trump and his senior advisers. And so, understandably, when this fantastical dream gets punctured, as it already has been, you don't know which way to turn. People say now, well, Trump would like an off-ramp. But I mean, Trump won't even be sure he wants to do some out-of-war stuff, because he's paying every price in terms of popularity, in terms of elections, and so forth.

#Pascal

But it's a bit like Ukraine, you know.

#Michael Brenner

Yeah, he'd like to disentangle the U.S., but he's not prepared to make any kind of concession that would be widely viewed as a failure for the United States and as a personal loss. I mean, what is most intolerable to someone with Trump's narcissistic personality is to be branded, to be seen, as a loser. And so it's very hard to see how he extricates himself from the Iran debacle, when any reasonable path out of it—inescapably—is going to reflect what most people, states, and governments will see as a failure, and the United States, and Trump personally, as a loser. Which I think is one reason why I suspect—because I have no inside knowledge about these things—that there's going to be no off-ramp, or that the administration is not going to consider any feasible off-ramp anytime soon.

That they'll continue to prosecute the war by one means or another, not even excluding the possibility of sending ground troops—not to occupy Iran, because you can't do that—but perhaps on the impractical idea that you seize the coast and open the Strait of Hormuz and so on, with American troops, infantry, and Marines. For most people with military backgrounds, that was almost an impossibility. They might very well go—Trump and his associates might very well go—down that road, because in purely personal terms, and in terms of the grandiose vision of the United States in the world, losing or admitting failure is worse. So I don't see any reason for even muted or qualified optimism. You know, when a society or a ruling camarilla or whatever begins to unravel, and when their attitudes, emotions, and thoughts—such as they are—begin to diverge sharply from reality, then anything is possible.

#Pascal

Anything.

#Michael Brenner

And I think, as far as Israel is concerned, it's not impossible that they would consider at least using nuclear weapons. Or what they could do is, if things continue to go badly, and if in Washington Trump began to take seriously the idea of trying to disengage, then Netanyahu would go to Mar-a-Lago and tell Trump, "Hey, look, we can't accept that, and we're going to use nuclear weapons if we have to, unless you commit yourself fully and are prepared to escalate in the war." How he'd react, I don't know. And that leaves aside the possibility that Netanyahu might be in a position to blackmail Trump through those Epstein tapes—because Epstein taped everyone, and doubtless stashed away somewhere are videotapes that involve Trump. And since the whole Epstein escapade was a Mossad brainchild, no doubt some of them, at least, are in a vault in Israel. Now, I'm not saying that's definitely the case. It is a very real possibility.

#Pascal

It is a real possibility. And, you know, this is one of the things we'll still need to explore in the future. Because, you know, the Trump presidency, number one, was a lot of things. But one thing it was not—or he was not—he wasn't bloodthirsty. He wasn't the kind of person who would say, "We'll kill them all and slaughter them," and whatnot. Now he does. With the announcement of this war, he did. And this change of heart, to me, is one of the things that could be explained by outright blackmail. But this is all speculation. Michael, we're already nearing the hour, so I'd like to thank you very much for all the explanations.

#Michael Brenner

I thank you, Pascal. I always very much enjoy talking with you—engaging as the discussions are. I must admit, I do envy spring in Tokyo and the cherry blossoms. After all, living here on the plains in Comanche country, Texas, the most exciting thing I can anticipate is seeing the spring winds and the tumbleweed rolling down Main Street.

#Pascal

We talked about tumbleweed before, and I still imagine it as something peaceful. But maybe I have too romantic an image of the tumbleweed. I'll send you pictures of the cherry blossoms once they bloom. Michael Brenner, thank you very much for your time today.

#Michael Brenner

Thank you. Thank you, Pascal.