

Jeffrey Sachs: Iran War Could Escalate Into Nuclear War

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs argues that desperation is growing in the US and Israel as they fail to defeat Iran, and nuclear weapons could be used if we continue down this path. Jeffrey Sachs YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@JeffreyDSachsOfficial> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/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 by Professor Jeffrey Sachs to discuss how the war in Iran may be spiraling out of control, and also how it might be possible to bring it to an end. Thank you very much for joining us again from Malaysia.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Great to be with you, Glenn, as always.

#Glenn

So Israel has what's often referred to as the Samson Option. That is, it's considered a last resort—if Israel faces an existential threat, it could use nuclear weapons against its enemies. This is dangerous because the U.S. and Israel seem to be exhausting their arsenals, including their interceptors. The situation isn't just deteriorating; it's escalating very quickly. I saw that the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that one of Trump's top advisors, David Sachs, warned that Israel could be destroyed, and under these conditions, Israel might use nuclear weapons against Iran. So I was wondering how you assess this spiral of escalation and the possibility of it actually falling into a nuclear war.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Yes, David Sachs—no relation to me, by the way, but a friend—said a couple of days ago that Trump should declare victory and go home. He was speaking essentially as a Trump advisor. He's the AI czar in the White House, advising on digital and AI policies, and he's an influential observer. He wasn't predicting a nuclear war, and he wasn't saying we're at that juncture. But what he was saying is

that if this just continues, it will be awful. He was basically telling his boss, Donald Trump, “Just go home.” That was the message: just end this. It’s a debacle, but call it a victory—Trump easily does that. But don’t pursue this further; it’s leading to worse and worse outcomes for the reasons you mentioned. On the economic side, the risk of global calamity is absolutely growing day by day, no matter how they try to calm the markets or talk about releasing emergency reserves from the strategic oil reserves.

The fact of the matter is, people can do arithmetic. The Strait of Hormuz is closed. The release of 400 million barrels of oil, which was what was announced, amounts to roughly 20 days of normal flow through the Strait of Hormuz. Not very impressive, actually, for what looks like it could be a deadly, long crisis and disaster—not only because the straits are closed, but because production of oil and gas is shutting down, and the physical facilities, one after another, are being destroyed right now in the tit-for-tat fire between the U.S. and Iran. And this is why David Sachs advised the president he serves: just stop and go home. Since Trump lives in a delusional world to begin with, he can declare victory. He can say how wonderful it is.

Look at how many people we murdered. Look at how many leaders we killed. Look at how much infrastructure we destroyed. Remember last summer—he declared victory and went home. Of course, it was absurd then as well. But this is the option. What David Sachs was saying is that that is actually the best security for Israel too. It’s not only the right thing to do from the point of view of the world economy, the right thing to do from the point of view of U.S. security, but also the thing that would keep Israel safest. In other words, this war is to nobody’s advantage. It’s a pure lose-lose-lose all around—a loss for Israel, a loss for the United States, and a loss for the rest of the world, especially, of course, Iran and the Gulf countries.

#Glenn

I spoke a little bit with David Sachs over email. I’ve been trying to get him on the program—he seems like a good guy. But I was also thinking that if the U.S. actually escalates one step further and goes after Kharg Island, and Iran retaliates against the energy installations across the Gulf states, it doesn’t really matter anymore if the Strait of Hormuz is open—if everything is in flames and destroyed. And of course, it’s going to take much more than 20 days. I also thought the same about opening the strategic reserves—it doesn’t communicate a lot of confidence when one is willing to deplete them to such an extent. But you, with your colleague—Sybil Farris—you wrote about the five steps Trump could take to put an end to this war. Essentially, the off-ramp that David Sachs advocated for. So if Trump reads it, or calls you, or listens to this podcast, what are those five steps you would advise?

#Jeffrey Sachs

Well, for one, he’s not going to call. Maybe David Sachs will read it.

#Glenn

If I could interject very quickly—at one point, before he got elected, he actually tweeted out a video of you talking about the Middle East. So, you know, I'm glad he listens to reason, but sorry for... yeah.

#Jeffrey Sachs

That was a video that warned about Netanyahu. I said, "That is one dark person." I used a little less temperate language, but I said this is a big problem. And Trump tweeted that out at the time. A mystery—but what I said turned out to be absolutely right, which is that not only is Netanyahu Mr. Genocide, but now he's setting the whole Middle East on fire, and the whole world is soon going to understand that Israel created our global economic crisis. It's not going to be good for Israel's security, this kind of approach. So yes, Mr. Trump did tweet that out. Maybe he can listen to someone who tells him, "Cut your losses, declare them a victory in your own way." That's your business.

But don't drag us into disaster. That's the point. Now, what my colleague Sybil Farris and I recommend is a real end to the conflict in the Middle East, because we say there are interlocking parts—it probably won't happen, and we stress that in the article. We're not naïve optimists; we're just saying that the way you make peace is by recognizing everybody's security interests. That's also the point about Ukraine. Since Russia's security interests are never recognized, there's no peace. The same goes for the Middle East. If you want peace—which most normal people in the world, I'd say all normal people in the world, do—then you recognize everybody's security interests. What are Iran's security interests?

Not to be bombed repeatedly by Israel and the United States, and not to have Netanyahu say for 30 years, "Overthrow that government." It's that simple. The U.S. and Israel need to stop their brazen, blatant, illegal armed aggression against Iran. This isn't even a preemptive attack, because Iran wasn't attacking anybody. This is just brazen, naked aggression, and it's a clear violation of international law. So that was point number one. Point number two: Trump says every day, "I need to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon." I don't know whether he's so ignorant he doesn't understand what he's doing, or whether it's a game, but the simple point is there was such an agreement—and you, Mr. Trump, ripped it up.

Of course, that was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, negotiated in 2015 between Iran and the permanent five members of the U.N. Security Council—not just the United States, but Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany—and then ratified unanimously by the U.N. Security Council. The essence of it was to reinforce the Supreme Leader's religious command that Iran would not pursue a nuclear weapon, because the Supreme Leader said this was against their faith. So Iran put

itself under strict inspection and honored the agreement. It was the U.S. that ripped it up—Trump, in 2018. I don't know if he remembers; the man, on the surface, remembers nothing, learns nothing, knows nothing.

But I don't really know whether he remembers that he ripped up the agreement that accomplished exactly what he said. Maybe he can remember that the Iranians said again last year, and this year, that they don't want a nuclear weapon. They want to have a negotiated agreement. They want to be under U.N. scrutiny. Maybe—though I doubt it—but maybe he could find an aide to let him know what the Omani mediator said the day before they killed all the leadership, which was, “We made great progress, and we're going on to the next round of negotiations in Vienna,” because the Iranians don't want a nuclear weapon. And so this is the second point. Yes, it's not even hard, Mr. Trump. It's never been the issue with Netanyahu. It's not about nuclear weapons; it's about overthrowing the Iranian government.

That has always been his dream. The third point is to open up the Strait of Hormuz—and that's not by Trump himself, pitifully, pathetically demanding, “NATO, do this; China, do this,” to get him out of the incredible mess that he and Netanyahu have created for the world. It's something for the Gulf Cooperation Council—that is, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula—and Iran to work out bilaterally. What's needed is for the Gulf countries to say they are taking sovereignty over the military bases on their territory, and that those bases will never be allowed to be used in aggression against Iran. That's how to get the Strait of Hormuz opened up again: the Gulf countries on one side, Iran on the other—all Islamic nations, all part of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

In fact, both the United Arab Emirates and Iran are part of the BRICS countries. It's not even hard for them to agree with each other. The mistake the Gulf countries made was handing over their sovereignty to the United States, as if that were some kind of protection for them. But what they should do now, seeing that there's no protection in having these bases, is reassert sovereignty over the bases in their countries and reach an agreement with Iran. The Strait will open, and these bases will never be used against Iran. The fourth plank is the one that's so obvious, but also the one that's actually the cause of all the wars of the last 30 years. And that is that Israel needs to return to its borders of June 4, 1967, so that a state of Palestine is created in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, on the internationally recognized borders.

And this is what Israel has gone to war repeatedly to block. This is the basic point of all these wars, including this one. Why has Netanyahu dreamt for 40 years of overthrowing the Iranian regime? Why has Netanyahu been part of every war in the Middle East? Because his doctrine is that Israel will control all of Palestine—and, with some of his zealous, zealot partners, even more: part of Syria, part of Lebanon, part of who knows what. According to U.S. Ambassador Mike Huckabee, who's another part of this disaster, Israel has the right to all the land from the Nile to the Euphrates, says Ambassador Huckabee. OK, well, the whole reason for all these wars, from the Israeli point of view, is that they've said there will never be a state of Palestine. “We'll kill them. We'll expel them.”

We'll rule over them in an apartheid state. But there will never be a state of Palestine, and any government in this region that backs the Palestinians, we will overthrow. That is the so-called "Clean Break" doctrine of Netanyahu that has been in place for 30 years. So, the fourth plank is a state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. And you know what? Israel has no veto over that. The reason it doesn't happen is the U.S., and the U.S. alone. This was voted on in the Security Council last year and the year before, and the U.S. blocked it. This is simple. People should understand: almost every country in the world says, of course, there should be a state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. But the U.S. uses its veto in the U.N. Security Council to block that. So that's the fourth plank.

Enough of this. This is the most basic point. Israel got insanely greedy—or insanely zealous, depending on who exactly we're talking about—to say, "We get 100% of the land." You know what we're talking about for this Palestine right now? It's 22% of what was British Mandatory Palestine. And Israel says, no, not even 22% for what is half the population. Not even 22%. We demand everything. That's why we're in nonstop war. So that's the fourth point. And the fifth point is that, with a state of Palestine established and welcomed into the United Nations as the 194th member state, Hamas, Hezbollah, and any other militant groups will be disarmed. They will disarm because the entire region will insist that they do, and so will the UN Security Council.

And they will disarm because the state of Palestine will be created. And this is how to make peace. So what blocks this? What blocks this is a coalition of Israeli supremacism, Israeli apartheid, and Israeli violence that goes back to Netanyahu and his party, the Likud, which, in its founding charter in 1977, says that all the territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea will be under Israeli sovereignty. That's why all these wars across the region have raged—because that basic fact goes against every standard of international law and decency. Countries have supported the Palestinian cause, and therefore Netanyahu and the United States have gone to war to overthrow those governments that have supported the Palestinian cause.

#Glenn

I like this five-step plan, but I also like your focus on indivisible security, because I think that goes to the heart of what's required. States compete for security, and weapons for one state are often—well, security for one is insecurity for another. So you have two ways of producing security. Either you have indivisible security, where we elevate our common security—in other words, I don't point a gun at you to have more security for myself—or you can pursue hegemonic peace. In that case, you don't care about indivisible security; you have one power dominate to such an extent that no one can even dream of challenging it.

I think this is the source of the Iran war, but it's also the Ukraine war. If we just accept that the hegemonic era is over—as a matter of fact, the distribution of power has shifted—then we would have to essentially restore the principle of indivisible security. Otherwise, if one wants hegemonic peace again, like in the '90s, one has to restore it. That means defeat Russia, defeat Iran, defeat China. And, you know, I would read Israel's "Clean Break" into this because, when it emerged in '96,

it was part of the hegemonic era—that is, abandon diplomacy and compromise. Instead, go for everything because you're backed up with overwhelming military force.

#Jeffrey Sachs

That's exactly right. And this is the delusion—that such overwhelming force exists. It's immoral, that's another matter, but it turns out to be disastrous to hold such delusions. The United States held those delusions in Ukraine, because we should remember the Ukraine war started with the United States' attempt to assert its hegemony over Ukraine. Zbigniew Brzezinski spelled it out; it was the doctrine of the neocons: we're going to expand NATO anywhere we want—up to Russia's borders, surrounding Russia, in Georgia, in the South Caucasus, in Ukraine, around the Black Sea. That's our business. We are the superpower. Well, Russia had different thoughts about that. But that's where that war came from, because no one cared to listen to Russia's security concerns at all.

And that's still true today. It's like hitting a blank wall to tell any European leader that Russia has legitimate security concerns. OK, and now in the Middle East, it's exactly what you say. Netanyahu thought, well, I've got the easy plan—I don't have to compromise on anything. We win because we have the United States. There are famous clips of Netanyahu saying—I'm not even sure who he's talking to—"We own the Senate, we own the Congress, we can get the United States to do what we want." The truth is, our own CIA and military have their delusions too. They see Israel's hegemony in the Middle East as just fine because it's part of America's global hegemony. What's happening right now, in part, is that Trump thinks, I'm going to corner every export of oil—Venezuela included.

I'm going to demand that Mexico behave itself. I'm going to take over the Americas, as he's explained. I'm going to take over the Middle East. I'm going to choke off Russian oil through sanctions. I'm going to decide who gets energy in this world. Well, this is a madman's thought. It leads to global disaster, but it's exactly that hegemonic idea: I don't have to deal with anybody. We don't have to talk with Iran—we just have to kill them. That's all. And that's what they think they're doing right now. Not only is it murder, but it doesn't even work to achieve your own security. Israel is at far greater risk than it's ever been because of this, and so is the United States—at greater risk because our risk is nuclear war.

And we keep pushing the world closer to nuclear war through these actions—by not respecting, even in discussion, the security interests of the other side. It's the same in Taiwan. We say we're going to send arms as we like to Taiwan. China says, excuse me, Taiwan is part of China. Do not send arms on your own; that for us is a red line. The United States, filled with the idiocy and recklessness that it is, says, we don't have to listen to them. It's our business. We are the United States of America. And by the way, it's Trump, but it's also the CIA, the Congressional Armed Services Committees, the arms contractors, and Silicon Valley. They all share this delusion that we don't have to take into account anyone else's concerns. And that's what's leading us to disaster.

#Glenn

This is our last question. How do you make sense of the way Iran was underestimated? You've worked with a lot of state leaders around the world and seen how they think strategically, what their considerations are. How could it be that we have reports suggesting Trump dismissed the likelihood of Iran closing the Strait of Hormuz—which should have been the most predictable thing—or the attacks on U.S. bases? It seems they underestimated the weapons Iran has at its disposal, or believed that killing Khamenei would collapse the government and make people pour into the streets waving American flags. And now there's this assumption that threats will make Iran capitulate, even though the country is in an existential fight. I'm just wondering how they got this so wrong. Is it just hubris, or a disconnect with the intelligence community? I haven't seen this in previous wars. There have always been mistakes, but this seems very, very different.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Well, remember the Iraq War, for example—how every single thing was wrong. Every prediction about the “cakewalk” we were going to have, how democracy was going to come, and so on. There was an interesting interview in 2004—I think it was a *Time* magazine reporter, if I remember correctly—with a White House official, maybe Karl Rove, I'm not absolutely sure. He was asked about the reality of the situation, and the response from the White House was, “Excuse me, we create our own reality.” And that's part of the issue: when you're so powerful and arrogant, you just think, “We'll make it work.”

Trump didn't know what he was going to do after the first hour, but he said nothing—“we'll make it work.” It's complete improvisation. Of course, the real lesson is that these are disasters. It's said that it took twenty years for the United States to go from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. So that was a twenty-year effort. And they credit Trump that it took nine days to go from Khamenei to Khamenei. So this is American efficiency. In other words, we're not accomplishing anything. We're going around in circles, killing a lot of people, spending a lot of money. Maybe that's part of the point—because they want to spend a lot of money. That's profit for somebody and losses for all the rest of us. But I think the main point is, we don't even have a process in the security state right now. The United States' ability to plan anything has collapsed.

We're just in improv mode. We have a psychologically unstable president. We have a constitutional process that's over because Congress refuses to use its constitutional authority and responsibility. And I can tell you, in every area I know of, there's no thinking going on. There are no reports, no studies, no careful scrutiny, no review. It's improvisation—it's flailing around. So frankly, none of this surprises me. We don't even have minimal processes of thought. We have a president who just makes things up as he goes along, and you end up with everything fake and then desperation. “Oh, NATO has to come to our aid. Even China, which was the target of much of this, has to come to our aid. Where are our friends?” says Donald Trump. My God, a five-year-old would show more self-awareness and responsibility, frankly.

#Glenn

Yeah, and I'm thinking, with all the religious advisors who come to his office, he should have known that pride comes before the fall, or that God opposes arrogance. But he has different religious advisors, it seems. Anyway, it's late over there in Kuala Lumpur, so thank you very much for taking the time. Of course, great to be with you.

#Jeffrey Sachs

We'll see you soon. Thanks.