

# Alastair Crooke: Israel-Iran Shadow War: The Assassination Gamble

The interview examines reported high-level assassinations, uncertainty around Israel's leadership, and the growing role of psychological warfare between Israel and Iran. It argues that targeting more centrist Iranian figures could backfire, deepen resistance inside Iran, and shift public mood across the region. It also highlights rising anxiety in Israel and Washington, pressure from U.S. politics and midterms, and fears that disruptions around Hormuz could drive inflation, fuel prices, and a wider geopolitical realignment toward Asia and BRICS.

## #Nima

Breaking news: we've learned from Israeli officials, including the Defense Minister, that they have assassinated the head of Iran's National Security Council, Ali Larijani. Recently, there have been a lot of rumors about what's happening with Benjamin Netanyahu—some sort of fake AI stories and that sort of thing. But when it comes to the assassination of people like Ali Larijani, I would consider him not a radical; he's more of a reformist type of person. He's not that far to the right—he's somewhere in the center. Yeah. And with what's going on in Israel as well, in the Israeli media, what's your understanding of this psychological war, somehow, between Israel and Iran?

## #Alastair

Well, you're right to point out—I've seen the claims that he's been assassinated. I don't know if they're true; they haven't, as far as I know, been confirmed in Iran yet. But possibly it is true. I mean, that's the vibe I get—that we ought to be...

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expecting that to be the case.

## #Alastair

And, you know, this is a track that Israel has been on for a long, long time. You remember—assassinations, killings, decapitations—have been their basic modus operandi. And often it ends up worse. I don't recall the exact dates, but you'll remember that the previous head of Hezbollah was Musawi, and the Israelis were determined to kill him and others in the leadership—what they saw as the clerical leaders in Hezbollah. And what did they end up with? They ended up with Nasrallah, a

hard-line person. And I think what you say about Ali Larijani is quite true. Larijani is a very intelligent, intellectual, thoughtful person. He's not by any means an extremist—if you like, on the more militant or determined wing. He's actually much more centrist, shall we say.

And so we don't know who will replace him. There's talk that it might be Qalibaf. I don't know if it will be Qalibaf, because there was a difference between these two appointments. Larijani was head of the whole Supreme National Security Council, so he was dealing not only with—well, I mean, there was a military aspect to it, which has now been, if you like, taken out of the main Security Council function and left with military experts under the command of Qalibaf. And Qalibaf has been managing the military side of it—the operational side of the war, my understanding—whereas Larijani had to deal with the diplomatic side, with relations with India, and with all these other aspects of it. So will they want to take Qalibaf out of his role, which, by all accounts, he's played very effectively, for that? Well, maybe. I mean, we can't say.

But as I say, there are always unexpected consequences to these things. Israel always assumes that killing people they think are not pro-Israeli is somehow a necessary function. But it often, if you like, is counterproductive—even for their own interests, let alone the interests of many others. I just have to say, this whole thing of killing and killing—anyone who's deemed not pro-Israeli should be killed—is terrible. And Trump has been starting to say these sorts of things too. I find it very—well, it's really quite disgusting.

And he said that journalists who don't support Israel should be prosecuted for treason under the Treason Act. The Treason Act carries the death penalty. I mean, are they really going to say they'll kill people in America who don't fully support Israel in this war? Because there are a lot of Americans who don't, not just journalists. But we've got this whole "exterminate or be exterminated" mindset that comes out of Israel—you have to exterminate so that you don't get exterminated.

And of course, that's never been the calculus—either for Iran or for Hezbollah—although Trump claims that, you know, Hezbollah and others have said their aim is to destroy the Hebraic element of the land there. It's never been that. It's been to try to force them to give up the idea of special rights for one population group over other populations and groups with whom they share the same territory. That's quite a different prospect. And that's what Hassan Nasrallah said at the time: it was about exhausting and pushing Israel to a point of desperation where they would reexamine Zionism and realize it was the wrong path—to try to establish special administrative, security, and financial rights for one population group in territory occupied by other peoples.

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Yeah. How do you see the situation around Netanyahu? What's your understanding of what's going on right now? We haven't seen Netanyahu in the last two security briefings in Israel—how should we interpret that?

## #Alastair

Well, we can't—I mean, we just don't know. There's been a sort of tsunami of obviously AI videos being put out. But are they deliberately putting out AI videos to confuse the situation? Or are they AI videos released to cover up a reality they don't want to share with the world? We don't know that, and there's not much point in trying to second-guess it. We'll know in due course. For now, you can look through those videos and come to some sort of conclusion, but it may be wrong. The other thing is, we've noticed, in psychological terms, a huge shift taking place just recently, in the last few days, in Israel.

A big shift is happening, particularly in the Hebrew press, where serious figures are saying, you know, it's time for Trump to call a timeout and get out of this war. It's over—it's not leading to success. I mean, many serious military or political figures writing in the Hebrew press are saying there's been a complete change in tone. And if you look at the Hebrew press over the last few days, what's quite striking is the sense that everyone is just writing about banalities—about some arcane part of the conflict going on between the various parties, or about the upcoming elections in Israel, or something like that.

Who's saying this, or who's that? I mean, not about the war—I'm not saying anything about Iran. So why is that? I don't know. I'm not sure what it is, but it looks as if something quite important has struck Israel, because it's everywhere across the Hebrew press—a sort of sense that something has turned in Israel. I can't say how it's turned or what, but I think it's important, and we'll probably have to wait to find out what that is. But we've also seen some signs of anxiety and crisis in Washington—you know, people saying their security briefing was awful. I mean, coming out of those classified security briefings in Washington and saying, "Well, this is terrible."

They don't say what was terrible, but, you know, there is a change in psychology. And I think it's important to say—and I'm saying this to you, who know it already, but really for the audience—that there's a change in psychology, I believe, in Iran too. People have come together in a way that hasn't existed since the revolution. As a people, they've come together—absolutely solid and forthright, going out onto the streets. People who might have been in the opposition camp have now switched completely. I mean, there's no opposition of the sort that Trump imagines will somehow catch up and take control of the country.

There's a sort of resilience and steadfastness in people. You see it—something happens, an explosion goes off when there are crowds on the street—and people don't move. They just stay there. Even if someone in the crowd is killed, people just stay. During Ramadan, after iftar, after the feast, they're out on the streets. So I think that actually the bombing and the loss of civilian life have stiffened the opposition to the United States and Israel in Iran, and have created a kind of spirit of resistance—a spirit that's also tied to the whole essence of what it is to be Iranian and to be part of

this experiment. And I think that's another important element. I also think psychology is changing in the United States in quite a profound way too. We have to try to look at what it is—it's not entirely clear—but in some quarters, there's a touch of panic in the air.

I mean, panic not just about the war, but about the economy and the midterm elections. And there's also, you know, an issue coming to the fore: why are we in this war? It's not just about, you know, having a pretext—what's your pretext for launching the war? Whether it was the nuclear program or some other claim that Iran threatened Israel, which it didn't, or that Iran threatened America, which it didn't. But there's something there, because you keep getting the feeling—why did Trump go into something so obviously wrong?

I mean, it's so patently stupid to get into this war when, you know, normally he has quite good political instincts. And it's leaving many Americans, I believe—and you can hear them saying this—with a sense that there's something unseen here in this equation, some kind of past structure, something that can enforce and trap people into behavior they might not otherwise take. So there's this sense that Americans now have to look at themselves and ask: what exactly is the structure? What does it amount to? Who's controlling it? Because, you know, it's an invisible structure—one that Americans can't easily see.

It's obvious that it's there, and obvious that it has huge power behind it. But the question of who is actually controlling America's destiny is now becoming an issue—something important in America. And then we have, of course, the midterms, and the midterms are causing problems, real panic in the Republican Party. I mean, they've been having a meeting at the Doral Club, a golf club owned by Trump in Florida, looking at it. And, you know, I heard a Republican say, "Listen, most of the people at this meeting knew that, as things stand, they're not going to make it. I mean, the majority are not going to get through these midterms."

They're going to drown—or, if they can just stay afloat long enough until the 2028 elections—they hope they might be back up there. But there's a real sense of anxiety, you know, and they feel they've completely lost their MAGA base. So this is another element of the war, apart from the one about the economic situation. Because, I mean, part of this asymmetrical war that Iran is deploying—I'm talking here about the military front—it's always been an asymmetrical war, but it's also a war on logistics and on the economic situation. And it seems to me that that is really spooking people, that effectively Iran is controlling passage through Hormuz. For now, it's allowing certain ships through.

The Chinese ships are passing through. An Indian, and I believe a Pakistani ship, have also passed through. But others—the vast majority—are not able to. And that's creating a great deal of concern about inflation in the West and an economic slowdown, perhaps even a recession or worse. And that is, I mean, going to play out in a big way. This is going to play out in a big way in the midterm elections. And, you know, people are talking about gasoline prices—gas prices, as they call it—in California at eight dollars a gallon. And that's, you know, they consider that outrageous.

Americans are very affected—more affected than anyone else, I think—by the price of gasoline. Whatever you want to call it, petrol, gasoline, it really does affect politics. Not just people's pockets, but it's a sort of litmus test for politics. High gasoline prices are a vote against the incumbent government. I mean, it's kind of mechanical in that way, I think. So these are some of the elements. And they hope that China would switch—that China would, because of the closure of Hormuz, join in a process to open it. But I think they've miscalculated China's situation. Forty percent of the oil that goes through Hormuz goes to China.

Yet the reality is that, because China is such a big consumer of energy, that's only less than 5% of its total consumption. In other words, it's not, you know, existential for China. And in any case, it filled its strategic reserve before the war. It actually, unlike America, made some strategic precautions. It filled its reserves, and its tankers are passing through the Hormuz area. So, for China, this is not such a problem. Of course, they depend on this Iranian oil, but it's flowing, and it'll probably continue to flow during this period. And at the same time, they are exporting oil.

You know, to Europe, to Asia—their exports are soaring, and they're becoming less and less dependent on the American market. Their exports, I think, in the last quarter went up by nearly 20%, while their exports to America have been declining, because China is reorienting. And this has huge consequences, because the whole economy is now, if you like, pivoting toward China because of its exposure and its competitiveness. It's hugely competitive in a way that no one in the West—either Europe or America—can really compete with. It's got price deflation in manufactured goods, while we have price inflation. So China is not at risk from what's happening in Hormuz, as, you know, Biden and Trump seem to believe it is.

On the contrary, it's doing very well out of this period, and it's not likely to feel any need to change the situation on the ground. Because—and that's perhaps something we'll get back to later—this is a big geopolitical, geostrategic shift that's taking place. I just mentioned China, of course, Russia, and what Iran is doing by taking control of these choke points and the seaways of the Persian Gulf, through which most of the energy travels—40% of total energy, I think, moves along these lanes. They are actually changing the geopolitical situation of the Gulf states, but also other states—whether it's Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, all of whom are much, much more dependent on oil—and India and Pakistan.

Now, Iran, for the moment, has been allowing India to run its tankers, even though, you know, Modi went and sort of gave his blessing to Israel in an extraordinary show of subordination just before the war began. However, Iran is still allowing it—I think it's a political decision—not to capitalize on India's bad judgment, but to try to bring it back into the BRICS, from which it was quite evidently, you know, moving in the other direction. Not formally, but in terms of political alignment.