

Chas Freeman: Trump Back Down - Armageddon Postponed?

Ambassador Chas Freeman discusses Trump backing down instead of carrying out his 48-hour threat of destroying Iran's energy facilities. Iran's threat to destroy the energy and desalination plants of the Gulf States appears to have deterred the US, yet armageddon has only been postponed as there is no off-ramp. Ambassador Freeman was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centred post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defence and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> 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>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We're joined today by Chas Freeman, one of America's great diplomats, who served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense and as U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, among other positions. Thank you very much for taking the time.

#Chas Freeman

Good to be with you, Ben.

#Glenn

So, two days ago, Donald Trump gave his 48-hour deadline to the Iranians — that is, open the Strait of Hormuz, or the U.S. will destroy all of Iran's energy infrastructure, starting with the largest sites. Um, again, the Iranians responded by saying, "If you do this, we're going to have our own list of targets to destroy — energy facilities, desalination plants across the Gulf states." And, well, those 48 hours are almost over, and it looks as if Trump is making some efforts to walk this back.

So he's arguing that since this announcement, they've now had two days of good, productive discussions with Iran. However, the Iranian foreign minister just came out saying there have been no talks held at all. So again, I'm not sure which side is telling the truth. But the alternative to

walking this back would have been a war without any control. So I was wondering, how are you reading this situation? I know we can't say anything with complete certainty, but what do you see happening here?

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think Trump is trying to walk this back, and I don't believe there are any talks going on. What seems to be happening is just text messages between Stephen Witkoff and Foreign Minister Araghchi. You can draw several conclusions from that. The main one I draw is that the circumstances in West Asia convinced Trump, as well as Israel and Iran, that the only answer to their conflict was the use of force and that diplomacy shouldn't be employed. Ironically, Donald Trump agreed with that, but he's now learning that diplomacy is irreplaceable. In fact, the biggest issue here, probably from Trump's point of view, is the price of energy — oil in particular, gasoline at the pump in the United States.

I don't think he cares much about the impact on allies or partners, even the producers who are being battered by the war. But he does care about the impact on his election prospects from gas prices. The biggest threat Iran made was that they would totally close the Strait of Hormuz. At the moment, it's not closed — it's being operated like a toll booth on a highway. If you have the right license plate and are prepared to pay cash, you can get through. So we have quite a list of countries that have employed diplomacy to solve the basic problems, illustrating that diplomacy is not entirely a waste of time.

So these countries include China, India, Japan, and Turkey, and we know that the Italians and French have also been talking behind the scenes with Iran to try to work out a deal. That was the first thing. The second thing is that there's a clear pattern in this war, where escalation by Israel and the United States is met with counter-escalation, tit for tat, by the Iranians. The most recent and most frightening examples of this include an apparent American strike in Natanz. The Israelis disclaim responsibility for it, but this war — any air war of this complexity — has to be jointly choreographed. So the denial that this was coordinated with Israel falls flat. It's clearly untrue.

Anyway, the attack on the Natanz uranium enrichment facility was answered by an Iranian missile striking near the research reactor in Dimona, Israel, and apparently hitting an apartment block where many of the people from Dimona worked. That was seen as answering previous Israeli assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists with the killing or, at least, the maiming of Israeli nuclear scientists. And I think, as you mentioned, Iran came out with its own list of specific targets. One of those was the Ras al-Khair desalination plant in Saudi Arabia, which is basically the sole water supply for the city of Riyadh — a city of several million people. In other words, Iran has demonstrated that it would be prepared, in the end, to utterly destroy the Gulf Arab societies.

I believe Kuwait is about 90% dependent on desalinated water, Saudi Arabia about 70%. I don't know the figure for Qatar, but it must also be very high. And I think it's around 40% for the United

Arab Emirates. So Iran has just indicated that it is ultimately prepared to destroy these countries completely — to depopulate them. One can guess, or I think one can be fairly sure, that behind the scenes these countries remonstrated with Mr. Trump, arguing, as they have from the beginning of this whole crisis, that there should not be a war — that there should be diplomacy, that there should be dialogue. But the problem is that neither Israel nor Iran, both of which feel an existential threat from the other, can easily step back.

#Chas Freeman

Neither of them is prepared to enter a diplomatic dialogue or stop short of the annihilation of the other's power. In the case of Israel, apparently behind the scenes—Israel has not reacted publicly, as far as I know—to Trump's suspension, for five days, of his proposed attack on Iranian power plants. But behind the scenes, it is evidently very uneasy. It sees this as evidence of weakness and inconstancy on the part of President Trump. One wonders why it ever imagined he would be constant, since he's famous for his inconstancy. But it sees this as a strategic setback.

And of course, to the extent that the bombing campaign is reduced over these five days, that is directly contrary to the Israeli war plan. But in the end—and the same thing, I think, in the case of Iran—it's clear that Iran does not see its objectives as fully achieved. It wants to do much further damage to Israel, and it apparently has the capability to do that. It is undoubtedly, behind the scenes, talking to the Gulf Arabs about a plan for the future that would not have American bases present in the Persian Gulf. If I may, it appears that the Iranian embassy in Riyadh and the one in Doha, Qatar, are both functionally closed—that is, they have no personnel of consequence left.

At least that's the appearance. But of course, I don't know whether the Saudi embassy in Tehran or the Qatari embassy in Tehran has been closed. I suppose they probably have. But there are many other places for a dialogue—a confidential dialogue—that must be going on. Iran is not going to stop the war while its objective of removing American bases and the threat from the Persian Gulf is unmet. It is not going to stop the war when it has not taught Israel a lesson sufficient to deter future Israeli attacks. And it is not going to demonstrate weakness to its own public by publicly acknowledging an exchange of views with the Trump administration.

So there we are. We're left with a war that has—as has been said by others—in which there are only tactics, no strategy; there's power and no purpose; there is violence without any vision; and there is no credible scenario for ending the conflict. So this is a war that is its own justification. I mean, the basic premises on which it was started are entirely and demonstrably false. It appears to have put the final nail in the coffin of the Atlantic Alliance. So those of us who felt at the outset that this was a potentially momentous strategic error, I think, are being proven right.

#Glenn

Yeah, I'm a bit surprised—well, not surprised at all—by the responses from the Europeans. I thought that after Greenland they'd be a bit more assertive, but, uh, listening to Mark Rutte, it appears that, you know, they're still playing the same song.

#Chas Freeman

Uh, I was wondering, if I may interrupt you—he's still talking to his daddy in the White House. Other Europeans are not. There's a serious move now in Spain to leave NATO and ban American bases. In your neighboring country, Sweden, there have been large demonstrations, even though Sweden is a new member of NATO. I think we're beginning to see the unraveling, but we haven't seen it run its full course. And I think Mark Rutte is not faithfully reflecting the emerging attitudes of NATO members.

#Glenn

Well, the thinking, though—and the situation of the Europeans—it does appear to have some similarity with the Gulf Arabs. That is, if you want to find a possible solution to this, it's because they know that tying their security entirely, 100%, to a declining empire is not a good strategy. I mean, the Gulf states are recognizing this. The Europeans are coming to terms with it as well. And, you know, it's not as if the U.S. were only in decline but still wanted to hold on—that's one thing. But the U.S. has signaled very clearly, with the new security strategy, that if it's a multipolar world, if we can't be everywhere, then we have to make priorities.

And the priorities should be the Western Hemisphere and East Asia. So we want to get out of Europe. If it's a declining hegemon clearly stating you are no longer a priority, you know, we can have J.D. Vance telling the Europeans to their face that we don't need vassals, we need partners—they're not a force amplifier. At some point, you'd think a strategy would have to be developed. It just seems that, much like the Gulf states, it's the same in Europe: there's no strategy, no political imagination for anything else.

So they're just kind of reacting a bit, but I'm not seeing any grand strategy in terms of how the relationship with the U.S. should be readjusted to fit this new world. Because, you know, the Europeans are either one way or the other—completely subordinated to the U.S., or they start embracing this anti-Americanism. But there's nothing in between. Like, you know, find a different kind of relationship. I wish there were more of that, because it's either love or hate—nothing normal. And I'm wondering if the Gulf states can move in a different direction as well, because, you know, the U.S. doesn't want to be tied down in the Middle East either if it wants to pivot to other places.

#Chas Freeman

Well, several comments about that. First, obviously, there are completely different concepts of what the Atlantic Alliance means in Washington and in European capitals. Europeans believe it's there to defend them, and Americans believe it's to incorporate Europeans as auxiliaries in expeditions elsewhere—beginning with the severing of Kosovo from Serbia and then continuing with the NATO intervention in Afghanistan. You know, it's either a defensive alliance or it's not. And one of the great issues for European security architecture is the Russian conclusion that it is not a defensive alliance, but an offensive one. So that's the first problem.

The conceptual basis that used to unite the two sides of the Atlantic is no longer there. Second, yes, I agree. The Gulf states have no way out of this dilemma other than diplomacy, which means some accommodation with Iran, which in turn means some further distancing from the United States. And then the question is, since that seems to be the most likely outcome—of course, for the time being, the Gulf states cleave to the United States because they have no other alternative—but they can't publicly identify with an Israeli-American attack on Iran, because Israel is totally unacceptable as a partner in any public way. Privately, they may benefit from access to the police-state technology that Israel has developed to oppress the Palestinians.

Privately, they may despise the Palestinians. Publicly, they can't afford to be aligned in any way with Israel, even against Iran, their hereditary enemy. Publicly, they can't afford to abandon the Palestinian cause. So they are really between Iraq and a hard place—or between Iran and a hard place. And I think the Europeans are in a similar position, but much slower to realize it, for the simple reason that so far they are not being battered by missiles from an enemy. Now, of course, some of them are working on providing justification to the Russians for reaching beyond Ukraine and challenging the unity of NATO. But the Russians have so far played a very cautious game in those terms.

But the Europeans are facing not only the dilemma that the United States is weakening, but also that the United States, from the European point of view—and I must say from my own point of view—is behaving insanely. It's doing things that can't possibly yield any benefit to it, things that are utterly irrational, unpredictable, erratic, and counterproductive. So it's not just the weakening of the United States, but the policy chaos in Washington that threatens Europe. I think, in time, Europeans will awaken to this. I don't know what to make of the French elections, which took place—I gather the right did very well, except in Paris, where someone on the left was elected. But European politics remain confused and confusing, and there's no consensus emerging that I can see at present.

So all those things are true. And in the middle of all this, if Trump has finally discovered the merits of maintaining a dialogue with Tehran—even if it's under the table and not acknowledged by Tehran, even if it's conducted by Stephen Witkoff, whom the Iranians have every reason to distrust, even if it's conducted by Trump, whom everyone distrusts now—the Europeans are still arguing about

whether to talk to Russia or not, which is quite remarkable. So I think all sorts of interesting things are happening here, but for me, as a retired diplomat, I find it interesting to see the indispensability of diplomacy once again illustrated in the ways that it is being illustrated.

I haven't talked about the global implications of this, but we've discussed that before. I mean, we're clearly looking at a global economic recession. The Trump administration has just advised Israel that the war is, quote, "going to go on longer than planned," unquote, and may extend until September. That means whatever remaining munitions we have to expend will be expended, which means we'll be incapable of acting on a global scale as we once were—even in terms of transit through West Asia, which is essential for the United States to remain a global power. I mean, we have to be able to move through that corridor to get from Asia to Europe.

Even if the arrival of the U.S. Marines near the Strait of Hormuz toward the end of this week is not a forecast of a reenactment of Gallipoli on the northern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, but is instead directed at less formidable and more reasonable political targets—for example, Abu Musa and the Lesser Tunb Islands, which are the focus of a territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates—it seems to me a more intelligent target for the Marines than Khark Island, which is way up the Persian Gulf, requiring American forces to run a gauntlet to reach it, unless Saudi Arabia provides a staging area, which I don't think it will.

You know, when Trump threatens to destroy the power plants in Iran—as he has, if not today, then five days from now, I think—and is met with a counterthreat to do the same to Israel and the Gulf Arabs, plus taking out desalination plants that are essential for the survival of those countries, I think he undercuts any possibility of actual cooperation from them. Finally, on the subject of the retreat to the Western Hemisphere—you know, there's a Chinese expression: listen to what he says, but watch what he does. What Trump says is one thing; what he does is entirely different. There's no way starting a war with Iran can be made compatible with either a focus on the Western Hemisphere or a focus on China, which are the two visions that remain competing in the schizophrenic American political mind.

So I think there's no clarity. The five days will go by. Perhaps Witkoff's texting to Haragchi will meet with something other than a reiteration of Iranian terms, which are essentially reparations—compensation for the damage—no American military presence in the Persian Gulf, and credible assurances that Israel will not again either attack Iran itself or connive in arranging an American attack, and so forth. There's a further element here, and that is a requirement for a security architecture in the Persian Gulf. Iran has put forward proposals, and so have the Chinese and the Russians.

I imagine that an organization like the Organization for Islamic Cooperation—formerly the Organization of the Islamic Conference—to which some 57 Muslim countries belong, including some with real political prestige like Indonesia and Malaysia, that are not in the region, but involving Turkey, which is a very important potential player in arranging some kind of peace here. Uh, I could

see the OIC organizing a conference among the regional parties, minus Israel, to compose a proposal for peace, with an invitation, I would hope, to Israel—whatever remains of Israel—to participate in mutual peace-building and economic development projects. But that may be too idealistic in a region that's justly famed for its cynicism.

#Glenn

Well, it appears that part of Trump's calculation was, as in all conflicts, maximum pressure. We saw this with what happened in South Pars, the world's largest gas field. That was Israel—presumably with the full support of the United States—that struck those gas fields. Then Trump came back, more or less saying, "It wasn't us, but don't you dare retaliate." So the idea was that the Iranians would essentially bow without climbing the escalation ladder with the U.S. But that's not what happened.

We saw this devastating retaliation by the Iranians against the Gulf Arab states. So what do you think happens, though, if Trump decides to follow through on his initial threats? That is, either in terms of attacking Iran's energy infrastructure, or if these ground troops he's preparing would actually be put into play to occupy Iranian territory. Because we've heard from the Iranians, you know, they can go after the energy infrastructure, the desalination plants, which you referred to. But this is all—this would break the backs of the Arab states, sorry, the Gulf states, wouldn't it? Yes.

#Chas Freeman

Yes, but here again, maximum pressure policies are basically power without purpose—tactics without strategy. They're the definition of this war, which can't succeed. We have the example of North Korea, and that should have been a predictor of what the Iranian reaction would be. Iran is a proud civilizational state, with influence far beyond its borders. It may be a multi-ethnic state, but it is a coherent one. And its reaction to bluster, blackmail, and bombing is predictable—rather like North Korea.

The only result of the policy toward North Korea was that North Korea developed nuclear weapons and an ICBM to deliver them—multiple warheads capable of reaching the United States. Iran is headed in the same direction. We don't know—Iran denies that it fired a missile at Diego Garcia and claims this was an Israeli false-flag attack, probably intended to keep the British in the war on the side of the United States. Since Diego Garcia is their property, they think the United Nations and the...

#Glenn

The international community believes it's part of Mauritius.

#Chas Freeman

Anyway, Israel has certainly been conducting a lot of false-flag operations intended to embroil others in the war against Iran—so far without success. There have been no actual movements, other than diplomatic ones, by the Gulf Arab states in response. But, you know, what this illustrates—whether it was a false flag involving the firing of an IRBM at Diego Garcia or not—is that the murder of Ali Khamenei, the late supreme leader, and his replacement by his son, has removed the ban on various weapons developments that the late leader had insisted on. He was the main opponent of developing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction.

Let's not forget that biological and chemical weapons are in that category too. He was the main opponent of extending the range of Iranian missiles beyond 2,000 or 2,500 kilometers. Those restraints are now gone. Iran is not ceasing to produce missiles, even in the middle of the war, apparently. And there's no indication that, contrary to the assertions of Israel and the United States, its war-making capacity has been taken out. In fact, missiles continue to land in Israel, and drones continue to attack the Gulf Arabs, who are very vulnerable to those. The attacks on Israel often include combined ballistic missile and drone operations.

Clearly, Iran can get through the three-layered Israeli ballistic missile or rocket defense, which starts with the Arrow at extra-atmospheric levels, then David's Sling in the high atmosphere, and finally the Iron Dome for slower objects closer to the ground. But it's not effective, even at this point. I mean, look at the attack on Dimona—that's the most heavily defended part of Israel, the most heavily defended site in Israel. And yet Iran was able to hit it with, I believe, two missiles. So if this is a war of attrition, it's not working out to the advantage of Israel and the United States. And, you know, when we talked some time ago, I think I described Iran's strategy as resembling that of Muhammad Ali in the boxing ring.

You know, rope-a-dope—allow your opponent to exhaust itself by firing everything it can at you, and then wait for the right moment to retaliate in a decisive manner. That moment of decisive retaliation may be coming, but Iran has not yet reached it, in its own judgment. Let me just add one other point here, which goes back to the necessity of a diplomatic resolution of this issue—and the very unlikely prospects for that at present. Israel has had a very clear policy, exemplified by its assassination of Ali Larijani, of eliminating anyone who could be a moderate potential diplomatic interlocutor on the Iranian side. Israel does not want negotiations, which is one of the reasons it gets so nervous when Trump claims there are negotiations.

I think that's incorrect, but it's fairly typical of Trump to exaggerate and misrepresent what's going on in order to manipulate public opinion—and, in this case, to manipulate markets—because the market has shown itself to be incredibly gullible. I'm talking about capital markets, Wall Street in particular, or the FTSE in London. These markets have taken Trump's assurances that this would be a short, victorious war seriously, despite all the evidence to the contrary. So the price of shares on these markets goes up and down in response to various, frankly delusional—or at least imaginative, perhaps even hallucinatory—claims by the Trump administration. There's no evidence of anything like that, or that Iran has achieved the conditions it considers essential to agree to end it.

#Glenn

So what are the prospects? I think there are two.

#Chas Freeman

One is that eventually there will be a negotiation of some sort, in which case Israel will have to eat crow. It will not be able to sustain the narrative that has prevailed for decades—of a menacing Iran and itself as the victim. Israel has been an actual threat to Iran in multiple ways. Over this entire period, Iran has been at most a potential threat to Israel, very much on the defensive. Maybe Israel will have to acknowledge that if there are negotiations. Perhaps the United States and Israel will part company on the issue of Iran. That is not easy politically for Donald Trump, given his dependence on the Zionist lobby and Zionist plutocratic campaign donations. The only possibility is that we subside to a level of lower-intensity, continuing conflict.

In effect, that would be a return to the status quo ante, because there was a low-intensity conflict going on between Iran and Israel, and to some extent between Iran and the United States—exemplified by the murder of General Soleimani in the first Trump term, and by several Israeli attacks on Iran in the second Trump administration, including the June war last year. So perhaps we'll go back to a situation where Israel, as Iran has been, is in constant danger of being attacked by its enemy—missiles coming out of nowhere, assassinations. Iran so far has not reciprocated Israel's policy of assassination. Will that refusal remain intact? We don't know. So, of the two alternatives, it seems to me a negotiated solution is far preferable to a low-intensity conflict, probably accompanied by continued terrorism from both sides.

#Glenn

The low intensity, though—this would essentially put it on the slow burner, allowing it to stretch out over a longer period of time. It just seems that if it lowers in intensity, that would give an advantage to Iran, because it can, of course, keep the Strait of Hormuz closed, which means the pain for the United States will keep growing.

#Chas Freeman

I think that would be a short-term closure, but then a return to the toll booth operation—you know, like a toll highway. You make a deal, reach an understanding, hand over your ticket along with some cash, and you can get through. That's basically what's been going on. All this talk about mining the Strait of Hormuz has no real evidence behind it. And the real question is why Iran would want to mine the Strait of Hormuz when it basically sees keeping it open to selected parties as a point of diplomatic opportunity and leverage.

So I'm not convinced there has been any mining—or if there has, it's probably on the shore closest to the UAE, leaving the shore closest to Iran unmanned. Anyway, we don't know. The only people in the world, by the way, with an adequate force of minesweepers to deal with this are the Japanese, who are not interested in going into a combat zone. They did come in at the end of the 1990–91 Gulf War. Once the combat had ended, they provided the capability to remove the multiple mines that the Iraqi side had released in the Persian Gulf. The United States—very foolishly, the U.S. Navy, I believe in January—actually got rid of four minesweepers, which, in terms of force planning, is amazingly stupid. If so...

#Glenn

Well, the Iranians—the selective opening is an interesting strategy, because now, of course, they can get reparations from the Gulf states for the attack by taxing them, essentially. They can demand that the Gulf states grant access in exchange for decoupling from or expelling U.S. bases. They can insist on selling oil in a different currency. So it does open up a lot of opportunities. And the Iranians themselves claim they didn't mine anything, but that they might do so if the U.S. sends in ground troops—then, out of necessity. But at the moment, it doesn't make any sense. In terms of a negotiated settlement, though, I was just wondering—where do you see the common meeting point?

Because so far, the U.S. more or less demands Iran's capitulation, while Iran wants U.S. bases out of the region. I'm just thinking, if the U.S. wants to pivot out of the region anyway, it could be an opportunity—but they don't want to hand over leadership to Iran, obviously, and that seems fair enough. But what could a middle ground look like? A new security architecture that allows the U.S. to reduce its troops and, in turn, reduces the threat to Iran—but still, you know, doesn't make Iran a regional hegemon or anything like that. Because if you look at what's happening in Iraq, it looks as if, in some places, Western troops are being pushed out anyway. So how do you see it—if there is a negotiated settlement, what is there to negotiate?

#Chas Freeman

Well, that's a very good question, of course. But before I address it, let me just mention that Iran has another card to play, potentially, by activating its relationship with the Houthis in Yemen to close the other sea corridor through which Saudi Arabia is exporting oil—through the Bab al-Mandab. So it can shut down the only remaining oil route that's basically coming out of the Arabian Peninsula, which is Saudi oil going out through Yanbu on the Red Sea. As far as a reasonable settlement is concerned, I think, you know, I have no idea what's in the mind of the Iranian leadership. It's a new leadership; it's not the old one. Raisi is there—he's obviously very capable as a diplomat—but it's not clear to me. It seems to me that you need to have a conjunction of two things.

First, you need to have some kind of regional security architecture addressed by people in the region—something like what I suggested the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the OIC, might be able to convene. In other words, a plan for a post-war order, even if it can't be implemented right

away. That plan might include a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces—not an immediate one—designed not to humiliate the United States but to remove the threat to Iran. It could include joint patrols between the Iranians and the Gulf Arabs. It might also include—and Iran has actually proposed this—a regional management system for collecting tolls in the Strait of Hormuz. That is, there would be a shared commitment among countries in the region to keep the Strait of Hormuz open in return for benefits that would be distributed among them.

Iran seems to be thinking about the post-war order in fairly constructive terms, if you're only looking at the interests of the Gulf Arabs. None of this would be a delight to the United States or to Israel. On the other hand, as you suggested, if in fact the United States is serious about pivoting away from the Middle East—away from West Asia, toward East Asia and the Western Hemisphere—this would facilitate that. So, you ask what's in it for everyone to have peace. I think clever diplomats could figure out some ways of achieving it. But that requires clever diplomats. There's no evidence of any such in our arsenal of diplomacy—the American arsenal. There's plenty of evidence of strategic thinking in Israel and in Iran. I'm not sure how much there is among the Gulf Arabs.

And the Gulf Arabs, as I mentioned earlier, are quite justifiably furious with Iran for the beating they're taking—very fearful, and also now very dismissive of the United States as a protector. Clearly, the United States no longer has the ability, the will, or the priority to protect them. It seeks to protect Israel, and it can't even do that, apparently. I think I should close by saying that, as usual, the physical war is accompanied by an information war. Israeli military censorship, with few exceptions, is very effective—and, to their discredit, is respected by Western journalists. So we have a lot of information about physical damage in Iran. We have a lot of information about physical damage in Lebanon.

We have some information about the ferocity of the ethnic cleansing campaign unfolding in the West Bank, but we have almost no information about the physical and human damage from Iranian attacks. Israel is obviously more concerned about the morale of its people than about its physical protection. Polling data suggests they remain ardently supportive of the war, probably in part because they don't actually understand what's happening. I note that Ben-Gurion Airport, the international airport in Israel, has now had a severe flight reduction imposed on it by the Israeli Minister of Transportation in order to safeguard lives, the minister says. But this also cuts off emigration from Israel.

If there can be no more than 50 passengers per plane, which seems to be the case, and the number of flights is limited, this bottles up a lot of Israelis. And again, I think the Iranian calculus is that a settler colony will have a bolt hole for most of the settlers. The settlers may be thinking about using their Spanish, Portuguese, or German passports to get out and not come back. Because if coming back means facing a low-intensity conflict—more of the same—why would you want to return? And, of course, we don't know what the level of emigration is during this war, because that, too, is off-limits for reporters. So we're missing a key element here in evaluating the battle damage of the war. What we do have, however, are clear indications of intent.

And to go back to how the war might end—you know, Donald Trump has offered an entire word salad, a smorgasbord of purposes for this war. Why not choose the pickled herring instead of the pickled radishes, or the lox, the salmon? And so... I gather, by the way, that "lox" is the oldest surviving word in the Indo-European language family. So Norway is at the center of the world in that sense. Anyway, my point is that Trump is in a position to pick and choose. He obviously failed in a number of things: no regime change, no state collapse—that's the Israeli objective, not the American one. No end to nuclear programs; in fact, their acceleration, and a much wider danger of proliferation. As Iran goes nuclear, one might expect others—Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt in the region, and others farther afield like Japan and South Korea—to go nuclear.

So the danger of nuclear war is likely to go up. The efficacy of the American nuclear deterrent is likely to be devalued—and that's even if the Germans don't go nuclear, which some in Germany are talking about. So I think he can choose another objective: physical damage. We've knocked Iran for a loop. We've done basic damage to the Iranian economy. Here, of course—and I'll conclude with this thought—the great irony is that one of Iran's objectives was relief from sanctions. And the Treasury Secretary has just lifted the sanctions on Iranian oil exports. Bingo for Iran. He got their number. So I think, anyway, Trump is very inventive when it comes to finding ways to chicken out of situations that he's created.

#Glenn

You were the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. How do you see them thinking there at the moment? Because you get the impression they might be going both ways. On one hand, this whole experience convinces them they have to link themselves more closely to the U.S. On the other hand, they also recognize that they have to—well, not decouple, but at least reduce their dependence—as the relationship with Iran has to change as well. So how do you see what's going on in Saudi Arabia?

#Chas Freeman

Well, I'm not there, but I would suspect there are two reactions. One, very short term, which is, you know, let's cooperate with Pakistan and exact retribution—let's get even with Iran. So they must be in a very vengeful mood in the short term. More thoughtful societies—and there are such people who think long term—are probably concluding that they must compose their differences with Iran on the diplomatic level in order to eliminate the threat. They instinctively know what Abraham Lincoln said: when you befriend an enemy, you gain a friend and lose an enemy. And that is the appropriate answer.

Threat reduction is a primary task of diplomacy, and they had begun to try this. They've abandoned it now for the short term, clearly. I think they'll return to it. But, you know, they face a difficulty they recognize. About twenty-some years ago, I gave a talk called **The Arabs Take a Chinese Wife**, in which I pointed out that while they were kind of tired of the United States, it was too big, in fact, to

throw out of the bed—but the Muslims could take more than one wife. And that, I think, is very likely the future.

And it means—I'm not speaking solely about the Chinese—it means finding other friends and doing something very important, which is the focus of the Saudi-Pakistani movement: a defense pact. That means building your own military industries so you don't have to buy weapons from the United States or another demonstrably unreliable partner. You know, you can buy weapons from China, but they don't come with a security guarantee attached. And if you buy them from the United States, that claim—that they come with a security guarantee—has been a major factor in making them attractive. That is now gone. So I suspect this is not good for U.S. arms sales in any sense.

Not only have the defensive mechanisms—the interception capabilities—proven inadequate and much less than claimed, but the security guarantee that made them attractive is no longer there. So I think the answer, in the short term, is vengeance. You know, there's an Arab proverb: "Kiss the hand you cannot bite." But I think in the long run, they will kiss the hand that bit them. At the insistence of the United States—let us remember that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arabs, including the UAE, were apparently trying very hard to persuade the United States not to yield to Israeli pressure to start this war.

They knew—even if Donald Trump didn't—what the likely result of the war would be in terms of disruption to their political economies, the pressure on them, and the physical damage they'd suffer. And I think, you know, I saw an interview the other day with the former intelligence chief of Saudi Arabia, Prince Turki al-Faisal, where Christiane Amanpour asked him whether he was surprised by the Iranian attacks on the Gulf Arabs. And he said, no—they said they would do that. We're only surprised that the United States took the action it did that produced this result. So the more thoughtful people in Saudi Arabia are clearly thinking strategically, not just tactically, about how to deal with the new circumstances in the Gulf. A long answer to your simple question.

#Chas Freeman

I apologize.

#Glenn

I appreciate it. Well, let's hope—though it seems unlikely—that there will be some negotiations soon. Trump's claim that they're reaching a negotiation doesn't seem to be true, but at least we can take some reassurance that there's an effort to walk this back. Because this is really spiraling very quickly out of control.

#Chas Freeman

Well, the hopeful note is that Donald Trump may be in the process of discovering the utility of diplomacy rather than the use of force. But then, one is never sure where his mind is. And I don't think Stephen Witkoff is a credible interlocutor at this point, given his past involvement in deception and his inability to deliver Donald Trump into the agreements he apparently hinted at—or perhaps even reached—at the negotiating table with his Iranian counterparts.

#Glenn

That's my concern, though—that once Trump discovers the value of diplomacy, it's going to be difficult after, you know, what was done to the JCPOA and then two surprise attacks. And, you know, there will be some trust issues.

#Chas Freeman

But that's why I don't think the Iranians are going to stop until they feel they have the United States basically where they want us to be. And I don't think—it's clear that Donald Trump, even if he never recognizes the mistakes he makes—understands this isn't going well on multiple levels and is probably most concerned about the domestic political impact. I talked a little about the price of gasoline at the pump, but there's also the fact that the MAGA movement has split on this. His own backers are now splintering more and more.

There are polls showing that the vast majority of Donald Trump's voters—something like 70%—favor an immediate end to the war. They don't approve of this war. So I go back to the point that it was foolish to start a war effectively authorized by Benjamin Netanyahu, not by the United States Congress as the Constitution demands. It was foolish to start a war with no clear objectives and no war termination strategy. And here we are, in the midst of this foolishness. The man who got us into it, Donald Trump, now has to find a way out—for himself, for our country, for the world, for the participants in the region. Whether he's up to it or not, we'll see.

#Glenn

Well, thank you for taking the time. As always, I really appreciate your insights.

#Chas Freeman

Thank you, Glenn.