

Scott Ritter: Trump Panics as Iran's Strategy Exposes His Biggest Defeat Yet

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#Nima

Hi, everybody. Today is Wednesday, April 15th, 2026, and our dear friend, our brother, Scott Ritter, is here with us. Welcome back, Scott.

#Scott

Thanks for having me.

#Nima

Scott, let me start with what's happening near the Strait of Hormuz — the blockade imposed by Donald Trump. So far, what do we know about that blockade, and how effective has it been?

#Scott

Well, I mean, it's hard to tell because we're getting conflicting reports from the United States Central Command and the Trump administration, which is portraying this blockade as being extraordinarily effective. And there are regional outlets—very pro-American, anti-Iranian outlets—that echo this sentiment, you know, somehow implying that traffic is flowing freely through the Strait of Hormuz and that the Iranians no longer have control over it. Then we compare and contrast that with reporting out of Iran saying, no, they're very much in control of the Strait, that they're collecting their tariffs, and that only those ships that pay the tariffs are able to transit.

And that there's been virtually no interruption of Iranian shipping or shipping coming from Iranian ports. So, you know, we have conflicting narratives. I'd say I support the Iranian narrative because it seems more reality-based. The notion that, first of all, there's no American shipping in the Strait of Hormuz—so the United States doesn't have a physical presence there—how can they dictate what happens through the Strait? They're not controlling that. The implication is that by putting some sort of picket line farther out into the Gulf of Oman and into the Indian Ocean, they're effectively interdicting illicit traffic.

Um, but the fact is, the United States can operate close to the Iranian shore—and it's not operating close to the Iranian shore. Their ships operate at a standoff distance, which creates a huge buffer zone for the transit of shipping that operates under the umbrella of Iranian missile defenses and outside the span of control of the United States Navy. So, logically speaking, the narrative put forward by Central Command and the White House doesn't conform to reality. I mean, it's impossible to say for sure, but I've always said this blockade is pure political theater.

#Nima

Yeah.

#Scott

We're back.

#Nima

Can you hear me, Scott?

#Scott

I can hear you. Yeah, there was just a little internet disruption.

#Nima

You're back.

#Scott

I've always said this is political theater designed to create the perception of American prowess and power, so that Trump can more effectively engage in negotiations—which are ongoing, by the way. People should understand that there was never a full break. Vance went home, and the senior Iranian leadership went home, but left in Islamabad are technical teams that continue to work away. And there's now talk about high-level representation returning to Islamabad as early as Thursday. Donald Trump is talking about a very spectacular two days coming up. I just think this blockade was always an act of political theater that would allow Donald Trump to sign off on a peace plan by making the case to the American people that this peace plan was only made possible because of the American blockade. That's my opinion.

#Nima

He had a phone call with Xi Jinping. He said he's happy because I'm going to open the Strait of Hormuz. It's unbelievable, because the Strait of Hormuz was already open for China. They didn't have any problem.

#Scott

No problem. The Chinese have basically told the United States to pound sand and keep their hands off the Chinese ship. But if Trump wants to take credit—look, China doesn't care. I don't think Iran cares if Trump's blustering and all that. If Trump wants to lie to the American people, and the American people want to believe that lie, that's our internal domestic political problem. As far as the Iranians are concerned, the reality is the reality. And at the end of the day, there will have to be some, I guess, political compromises made on the part of Iran. I think the Iranians are mature enough to understand that Trump is in a very difficult position politically right now. He got involved in a war that, in retrospect, he probably wishes he'd never gotten involved in.

Um, you know, I smile not because—because, on the other hand, this war has cost thousands of lives, most of them innocent Iranian lives. And the damage that's been done to Iran is real. It's not—well, the smile isn't meant to belittle these horrific losses. The smile is just sort of a physiological response to the stupidity of it all. I mean, this is just really lunacy. And this president has boxed himself into a corner, and he wants out. And there is a pathway out. But he has to make sure that this pathway can be sold to the American public as a victory for Donald Trump. And that's tough to do when there's been no victory whatsoever. I mean, the United States hasn't achieved any of its objectives.

Iran has emerged from this tragic conflict stronger than ever. I mean, you know, we keep talking about the destroyed Iranian Navy, and yet we have to acknowledge that they still have their fast boats that can lay mines, and they have submarines that can operate independently. We sank surface warfare ships that were never going to effectively challenge the United States to begin with. So we carried out a naval campaign that has no impact on the reality that's faced. Iran's Navy was more than just some surface ships. Iran's Navy right now has ballistic missile and drone capabilities that allow it to control the Strait of Hormuz and project power off Iranian shores to keep the United States Navy at bay. So which Navy has won this conflict?

#Nima

Do you see Donald Trump recognizing his mistakes? Because he had some kind of agenda, some kind of understanding—or we could say he had certain objectives in this operation—that led to this trap, in my opinion, in the Middle East. Does he recognize that?

#Scott

The internet cut out, so could you repeat the first part of that question?

#Nima

My question is, because of some sort of false assumption on Donald Trump's part, he entered this war in the Middle East. Does he recognize those false assumptions? Does he recognize his role in what's happened to him?

#Scott

Donald Trump isn't a man who seems capable of much self-reflection. He's someone who suffers from a sort of malignant narcissistic personality disorder—he's psychotic in that sense. He has an ego the size of the moon, and he believes he can do no wrong. So it's not about Donald Trump reflecting on the mistakes he's made. What he's trying to do is push those mistakes onto the shoulders of others. And there will be heads that roll because of this. You know, interestingly enough, it'll be curious to see how he deals with Israel, because this war was sold to Donald Trump by Benjamin Netanyahu and the head of the Israeli Mossad.

Um, you know, almost universally, Trump's advisors—military and civilian alike—cautioned against accepting the Israeli assessments at face value. And today, pretty much everything the Israelis laid out turned out to be false. They said they could achieve regime change—they haven't. They said they could suppress ballistic missile launch capabilities—they couldn't. You know, they've accomplished nothing. So I think Donald Trump recognizes this. His thing is, he's bought into the Pete Hegseth formulation that massive bombardment automatically equals victory because the enemy is intimidated. And Donald Trump seems to be very frustrated and perplexed by the fact that the Iranians don't acknowledge the scope and scale of their defeat.

Isn't it obvious you've been defeated? But then, Donald Trump doesn't understand warfare at this point in time, because blowing up empty buildings—or blowing up buildings with civilians in them—doesn't constitute victory. And, you know, the reality is we haven't destroyed much in Iran. That's just a statement of fact, and some of that's been proven. For instance, the Iranian Air Force is starting to emerge from their underground hide facilities. We've destroyed a bunch of derelict aircraft, but the newest model of Russian helicopters, the Mi-28s, are out flying over Tehran. F-4s are flying, F-14s are flying. I haven't heard any reports of the MiGs or the Su-35s yet, but I'm sure they're there somewhere.

#Scott

We haven't accomplished anything. Iran is producing missiles—producing missiles. It's not just that they still have them; they're producing missiles as we speak. So we haven't impacted their missile production facilities. What we have done is blow up a lot of sites that had already been evacuated. We blew up a lot of empty buildings, and we killed a lot of civilians because of collateral damage or

just outright bad targeting on the part of the U.S. military—a Defense Department slash War Department that was told to pursue maximum lethality with minimum legality. It's a war crime—straight-up war crime. I don't think Trump is capable of that kind of self-reflection at this point in time, though. And I don't think the U.S. establishment is capable of it either. And when they do reflect, it's not going to be about identifying problems and coming up with solutions; it's going to be about who gets the blame—whose head is going to be put on a platter and who gets to stay in.

#Nima

Scott, before this war started, you remember, you and I were discussing what the objectives of the war would be—what they would do. Our understanding, based on what happened during the 12-day war, was that Israel had a lot of intelligence coming out. If they didn't, well, they sure acted like they did. They seemed to know a lot. But looking at what's happened so far in this second round of the war, do you think they were somehow bragging to Donald Trump? Because it doesn't look like they actually knew where the missile or drone production sites were. They're just hitting civilians.

#Scott

Yeah, I think, first of all, intelligence isn't static. Okay? I've done it for a long time. You may have—well, you know, if I'm collecting, I do a collection management plan. I'm given a problem. The way intelligence work is supposed to function is that the leadership identifies a problem—they're looking for solutions. So a question is posed, like, can Iran produce missiles of a certain range? Or how does Iran plan to safeguard missile production? Or where is the Iranian leadership? These questions are posed, and then my job as an intelligence officer is to take that question and break it down into specific components.

How do I figure out what the sub-questions are? And then, as I do that, I have to make an assessment and say, okay, what are the essential elements of information to answer this, and how do I collect that information? If I have a question, what assets and resources do I use? So I'll come up with a collection management plan that brings in human resources, technical resources, imagery resources—all of that—focused on this problem. Then I start collecting information. As I collect, I can refine my assessments and ask new questions. But if you do a good job, you should come up with an answer. And then, you know, you brief your boss, and the boss will ask follow-up questions.

But understand that just because you got it right the first time—I've done this before. I've gone in, and I've nailed it. Boom—briefed the four-star general: "This is it, baby." But then you've got to stay on track. You can't allow yourself to pat yourself on the back and rest on your laurels, because things move. As I'm collecting, for instance, the enemy—the target—if they're smart, they're changing the way they do things just as a matter of course. They're listening to what's being said. Unfortunately, in the West, if you make politicians feel comfortable about something, they tend to talk about it. And they don't talk directly—they talk indirectly.

But the hostile forces are listening, and they're saying, "They're on to something here. Let's change what we're doing." And if I'm not doing my job—keeping the net out there, monitoring the changes—then I have to come back and say, "Hey, boss, that thing I told you last week? I don't think we can be so confident anymore, because it looks like the Iranians have done this, that, and the other thing. They might be moving in this direction. Boom, boom, boom." But see, once I get—well, the problem with the intelligence community is they're not like me. I don't give a flying you-know-what. I'll tell you what the facts are. And I've been fired before. General Schwarzkopf fired me in the middle of the Gulf War because I told him the uncomfortable truth.

I won't massage the data to make the boss happy. I'll tell the boss what it is. And if it makes him unhappy, that's his problem, not mine. Except I got fired. They rehired me because they knew I was right. But it doesn't matter. Unfortunately, there are people today who think that if they don't make their boss happy, they won't get promoted—and if they don't get promoted, their career is over. So once you've given the boss a positive briefing, you want to keep the boss happy. They keep telling the boss the same lie, or they keep shaping the data to reinforce that assessment that made the boss happy. And what happens is, the gap between the fiction they're selling and reality just keeps growing.

The gap becomes huge, and that's where we are today. I think after June, the Israelis had some good insight into the Iranians. I mean, they had collection plans in place. But then what happened is, they rested on their laurels. The Iranians, on the other hand, had to change everything. I mean, what do you do when you find out that the Mossad has built drone factories on your own soil that have been there for a long time? You don't just go and shut down the drone factory. You have to sit there and ask, "How the hell did this happen?" It's a systemic dysfunction within our system. We have to change everything.

But the Mossad's sitting there going, "We had drone factories, and we were doing some cool stuff with the drones." And everybody's patting themselves on the back about how good they are. What they don't realize is the Iranians are changing the whole game on them—just redefining how things work. And if you're not in there moving this stuff, the Iranians rolled up a bunch of networks. And, you know, the Israelis said, "Well, we've got a backup network." Yeah, but the backup network wasn't doing what this network was doing. The point is, I think the Israelis became too cocky, too confident. And the Iranians did the appropriate things. I mean, history will show—if they ever talk about it. We'll find out about this.

But the Iranians shuffled the deck, so to speak, which means the Israelis had an imperfect assessment. The assessment that Trump received from Netanyahu and the Mossad chief on February 11th may have been valid in June, July, maybe August, but it started to get dated in September, October, November. Then they got cocky again because of the demonstrations, and they focused on that. They didn't realize the Iranians were on top of everything. The president got briefed on bad intelligence. Bad assessments come from bad intelligence and incomplete understanding. And I think that's where we are today. We don't have a clue what Iran's doing. I

mean, a smart person should be able to reverse-engineer what's happened and come up with appropriate conclusions.

The problem is, when you do that, you often end up with an assessment that's so far removed from the one that originally briefed the boss, it becomes politically difficult to go in front of them and say, "Everybody was wrong." Because how do you do that? I mean, if you're a junior analyst and you're good, this isn't rocket science. It's easy. Reverse engineering—this is the simplest thing in the world. But now you have to go to your boss and say, "You were wrong." The boss is sitting there already spending last year's bonus that he got because he was supposedly so good, looking forward to his new promotion and the vacation that comes with it. And now the kid who works for him comes in and says, "You were wrong."

And you've got to go tell your boss that he was wrong. Nobody wants to do that. So they say, "Well, Ritter, let me see what you've got here. Hey, Anderson." They bring over Anderson, who's a good ass-kissing yes-boy. "Take a look at this, guys." Anderson comes back: "Scott's overemphasizing this." And they start to smother the assessments. Then what happens is maybe a little bit comes up here so they can blame this person, deflect onto that person. But you never get the comprehensive re-look that needs to happen. That's what happens when you have politicized intelligence. And the U. S. intelligence community is 100% politicized. We don't know how to tell the truth anymore. We don't have people who are willing to put it all on the line in defense of solid intelligence assessments.

#Nima

Scott, how did the Iranian attacks on American bases in the region influence the U.S.—the gathering of intelligence? Because we know when the war started, Donald Trump said he was surprised by the Iranian attack on the GCC countries. But part of that was them attacking radars, and part of it was attacks on CIA and Mossad offices in the region. How did that influence the whole concept of gathering information?

#Scott

Well, I mean, it complicates things. You know, the human intelligence dimension was severely disrupted, but it was always going to be, because peacetime human intelligence collection operates under completely different rules than wartime human intelligence collection. So I think by targeting the Mossad and CIA capabilities, it didn't have that much of an impact, because we had already transitioned into wartime collection, which is different—more technical in nature.

Um, you know, and hopefully, from the Iranian perspective, they took that into consideration. But the thing about war is that—look, Iran has to do things. I don't want to get too far off here, but you do things in wartime that are predictable. And because they're predictable, for instance, I, as a

military professional, could do things that make Iran respond. It's called shaking the tree. Then I'll have my capabilities focused on the fruit that's dropping from the tree. And because it's war, Iran doesn't have too much time to be cute. They're going to be doing stuff.

So if you're focused on doing the right things, if you're focused on the right things—if you know your enemy's capabilities, if you know how they communicate—I can be very effective in my intelligence collection. Now, I have to be on the ball because every day things change, but the point is, if we were really doing solid intelligence collection, we should know a whole lot about how Iran operates. The problem is, our political leaders don't want to know how Iran operates. They've bought into a fiction, and they have to keep this fiction. Nobody has the guts to go before the president and say, "Everything you were told was a lie." Nobody has the guts to do that.

Stand before the president and say, "Everything you were told was a lie, and everything you've done is based on a lie, and you have to fix it, Mr. President." There's not a single person in the U.S. intelligence or policy community who has the courage to tell the president that to his face. They'd be fired on the spot. They wouldn't be allowed into the White House. And so we don't have people doing effective intelligence anymore, because that intelligence is politically impossible to move up the chain.

People like me, who would be doing that, are fired, relieved, or reassigned—counting ping-pong balls in Alaska instead of doing what we're supposed to do. Because with these assessments, you can't run a blockade of Iran when good intelligence tells you it will never work. Nobody wants to hear that it will never work. What they want to hear is, "Oh, this is a good idea." And they sell the fiction. Everything about how this war has been run is based on foundational lies, mistruths, and miscalculations—done deliberately to disguise the fact that the original assessment given to the president was bogus, was a lie.

Nobody wants the truth right now. Nobody wants the truth. And as a result—look, the Iranians came loaded for bear to this Islamabad thing, with the facts. I would have loved to sit down with the Iranians and go through those facts as a policy person, to sit there and take their facts. Because, you know, I'm confident that I could get—look, you and I have talked about this issue before, about 60% enriched uranium and all that stuff. I would have the Iranians compelled to admit that that was a bad idea, that they don't need the stuff, and that they're going to get rid of it. That's an easy, easy discussion to have.

#Nima

I think they said that.

#Scott

They're not going to—yeah, they've already acknowledged that. And they would acknowledge it again. But, you know, we have to come in with the—enrichment's okay. You get to enrich to 3.5%, but because of the 60% issue, we have to shut down, in perpetuity, your ability to go to 60% again. That can't be allowed. That's not going to be allowed. We have to monitor against it and all that kind of stuff. In exchange, you get all the sanctions lifted. You get all the sanctions lifted.

#Nima

And it's a huge technical kind of negotiation. It's not about—

#Scott

But in order to do that, you have to stop the stupidity. On our side, when you allow Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to front, they don't understand when Araki comes in and says, "We've got 490 pounds of this stuff—or kilograms of this stuff." They go, "He's threatening us with ten nuclear weapons." No. What he was telling you is that Iran hasn't further enriched. Iran hasn't done this. It's all there, ready. It's there, ready to be turned over. That's what he was telling the United States. But our morons are sitting there going, "No, no, you're threatening us with nuclear weapons." Iran's not threatening anybody with nuclear weapons. Iran is saying, "We have this capability, and this is what it is."

This is the reality of it. But we're not ready to have that technical discussion. I don't think we have people capable of having that technical discussion, because you have to empower them politically. And right now, nobody in Washington, D.C., wants to empower the truth. It's the same thing with the Strait of Hormuz. It's an easy problem to solve—a very simple problem to solve. And it's one where I believe the Iranians, if you were politically responsible, would agree to a 10-year window of tariffs or tolls. So it's not permanent; you're not threatening international law of the sea or anything like that, but you recognize the inherent need for security guarantees.

Continued Iranian control over the Strait of Hormuz is a security guarantee that has to be recognized as valid, given that the United States and Israel carried out an illegal war of aggression and a surprise attack. You can't expect Iran to give up its leverage. And the fact that the Gulf Arab states directly or indirectly supported this attack means they, too, have to pay a price. But we can frame this in a way—there's a mechanism that could come into play—where it's about reconstruction or something like that. There's a way to spin it so that Iran gets what it needs politically, but it's not sold as an American defeat, which is important—politically important. I know all the non-Americans out there are saying, "Pound sand, we don't care."

Well, you know what? Then you'll never get a solution to the problem, right? This isn't about the humiliation of the United States. This is about finding a good off-ramp that ends this war so the people of Iran can operate free of economic sanctions, free of international constraints. They can

finally get the economy they deserve and attract investment. This is all good for the people of Iran if it can happen. Trump has to be able to do this politically. And right now, I don't think the United States is capable of empowering the right people. But we'll see, because it sounds like Trump is—there are technical people who are aware of everything you and I are talking about right now.

And I'm sure they've put forward working papers that have made their way to the president. That's why he sounds optimistic about some big breakthrough coming Thursday. We'll see, because this is Donald Trump and you just never know what's going to happen. But I think Trump wants out of this war. He recognizes that mistakes have been made, but now it's a political question. You know, if there were no politics involved, this war would be over today. But because there's politics involved—colored by an upcoming midterm election, which is all about the political legacy of Donald Trump—everything now has to go through a political filter, and it just complicates things so much.

#Nima

Yeah. We had J.D. Vance participating in TPUSA, and he was confronted by some people accusing him of supporting genocide. And, uh, J.D. wants to—I think he wants to be the 28th presidential candidate for the Republicans. How do you see the way he was negotiating with the Iranians? Because, from the Iranian side—I talked with Professor Miranda—he said that right in the middle of the night, you know, it was late, he decided to go to the United States, even though he had agreed before that negotiations would continue until Sunday. But he decided to leave. What was that, Scott? What was that? He kept calling Washington over and over. He talked with Benjamin Netanyahu, and Netanyahu said he was in direct contact with him because he wanted to report what had happened. What is that?

#Scott

Well, it's a reality that in the Trump administration, there's no such thing as an independent negotiator. The only voice that counts is Donald Trump. This isn't Richard Nixon giving Henry Kissinger permission to run off, solve problems, and then report back. The president was briefed on it, and Kissinger had great latitude. J.D. Vance had zero latitude—zero latitude. The fact that there was almost an Islamabad memorandum of understanding is solely because of the Iranians, who came in very well prepared. They were able to take whatever limited American input there was and immediately turn it into something. They were ready to move. It's a shame we blew that opportunity. But J.D. Vance wasn't there, in my opinion—he wasn't there to make a deal.

He was there to make it impossible for a deal to take place. The reason he left at midnight was because the Iranians were doing everything they could to make a deal. The Iranians were ready. They were like, "Let's get this thing done. Here it is. You got a problem? Here's a solution. You got a problem? Here's a solution. We're ready to do what it takes to get this thing done." And Vance wasn't allowed to close the deal, so he had to leave. Because this can't be—if J.D. Vance closed the deal, if there was a successful negotiation, it could only be interpreted as an Iranian victory: that the

United States met Iran in Islamabad, and at the end of the day, the Iranian ten points served as the foundation of the agreement. That's politically unacceptable.

So what had to happen was we had to go in there, engage with the Iranians, and then declare the negotiations over because of Iranian intransigence—then back out. That gives room for Donald Trump to go through the political theater of a blockade that is, in fact, a blockade. It allows him to declare victory, which he's done. Now he can go in, close the deal, and say it only happened because of the great strength and resolve he showed in proving to the Iranians who's the boss of the Strait of Hormuz. But now that's "solved," so we're going to have reconstruction—a great source of revenue, however he wants to spin it. But J.D. Vance just wasn't allowed to succeed. I don't think—some people say it's because Trump, you know...

#Scott

I think some people said it was about Trump trying to sabotage Vance. I don't think it's that. I just think it was about Trump making sure that, at the end of the day, the failure of the negotiations couldn't be put on his table. It had to be put on somebody's table. And it leaves room for him to ride in and save the day, which I think you're going to see tomorrow. I think tomorrow is going to be an interesting day diplomatically.

#Nima

Today we've learned that the Pakistani Army Chief, Asim Munir, has arrived in Tehran with a senior political and security delegation. He's delivering a message from Washington to the Iranians. Do you think this time around—since, as you mentioned, the Iranians were there and went to Pakistan totally prepared—you look at their delegation, they had everything: economic, legal, political, everything. They were ready to do everything properly. But how do you see it if something happens with the negotiations, with the talks? Do you see the same thing happening on the part of the United States? Are we seeing strong delegations with every dimension needed to negotiate, to talk?

#Scott

I don't know if we're capable of that anymore. I mean, I'd like to believe we could, but I don't know if we are. What I see is that we've become intellectually lazy. We let the Iranians do all the hard work—they'll use the Islamabad draft MOU as the foundation. It's been sent back, and there's been some tinkering with it. I think when we meet, we're going to use that document as the base. Look, I'd love it if we sent in a senior diplomat backed by all the experts in the U.S. community coming together to do what the Iranians did. But we don't have that kind of capability anymore. The State Department's been gutted. Donald Trump's approach to national security and foreign policy formulation and implementation is to remove all the middlemen.

So we don't have technical experts anymore. We don't have people who are singularly focused on this issue from a policy perspective. I think the team we send in is going to be a politically motivated team, there to save Donald Trump's presidency. It's about spin. You know, Iran has done all the technical heavy lifting, and the United States—I think we're just going to send another team of political spinmeisters. We'll see what it looks like. I think the Pakistani defense minister was also there because the Iranians were concerned the U.S. might shoot them down, that the U.S. might do something stupid. And I think the Pakistanis had to reassure the Iranians that they weren't being set up for a U.S. trap.

#Nima

That's so strange—publishing articles saying this is an opportunity to kill Iranian negotiators. It's unbelievable. You'd have to be totally out of your mind to suggest that. The guy who wrote that article... nobody would believe in any kind of negotiations if something like that happened. This is the Israeli sort of agenda, because they've been killing and assassinating negotiators. The United States cannot be like this. I don't believe the United States is like this.

#Scott

This administration is—this administration is unapologetic about everything. They're capable of anything. I mean, that's just where we are. This administration has modeled itself after the Israelis in terms of behavior. So I wish—I mean, if we'd had this conversation six months ago, I would have said the same thing you did: that's not how America operates. I can't say that anymore. I mean, look, Donald Trump killed Qasem Soleimani. The American people still don't know the truth about that murder. You know, this was a guy who was acting at the request of regional players to create peace opportunities. He was on a mission of peace, of diplomacy, which is why he traveled openly the way he did. And we murdered him as he was trying to coordinate nonviolent solutions to problems that previously had only been solved violently. We murdered the guy—Trump murdered him. And so we are fully capable of doing Israeli-type actions.

#Nima

You mentioned, Scott, it seems that in the minds of those people who are the main decision-makers in the United States and in Israel, there's still this idea that the Iranian government is ideological—that they're radical. But nobody sees the pragmatic attitude of the government in Iran. I would say there's nothing radical about it. If you know the people, if you talk to them, if you see the way they view the conflict—the war—so far, more than forty days into it, there's nothing radical about them, nothing ideological. They didn't attack civilians. On the first day, a primary school was hit by fighter jets, and they didn't go there, because they know what they want. They know what's practical for them. And that's what the United States, in my opinion, and Israel as well, fail to understand.

#Scott

No, look, we're dealing with people who are incapable of embracing the truth. Why did the Iranian regime survive the assassination attempt on Ali Khamenei? In the West, we think of it as a government of extreme theocrats—the Ayatollahs are in charge. But they're not. Iran's a constitutional republic. The president's in charge. Read the Constitution. The president has a lot of power. Even when you get into these various councils and committees, the president is the chair of them. He's the one sitting at the head of the table. Yes, the supreme leader is there, but he's there from a religious standpoint—to focus on ensuring that policies conform to the Islamic foundation of the nation.

But the Constitution drives everything. Even the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council are there to ensure, you know, constitutional conformity. This is a system that's been in place for five decades, and it works. And the Iranian people, by and large, believe in it. There are abuses of power—of course there are—but, um, you know, for people to say this is a regime of mad, radical Ayatollahs means you don't know anything about Iran. You don't understand how Iran works. You don't understand how Iran functions. The total disrespect you show to the Majlis and the whole concept of democracy, democratic representation, et cetera—well, that's the problem. And so, you know, we can't allow people who truly know Iran to be advising the president, because the only way these policies work is if you believe the underlying misinformation about Iran and its system of government.

But there's nothing radical about Iran. I think what we've done is we've empowered a more conservative element that's distrustful of the West—people who might be more inclined to pivot away from the West and engage more fruitfully with the East. But even then, remember, the people talking about that pivot, it's not as though they've sold out to China or Russia. These are Iranian patriots. We don't respect the fact that the people governing Iran today are Iranian patriots first and foremost—that they're looking out for what's best for Iran. One of the reasons they've rejected the policies of Rouhani and, uh, Zarif is because the West has betrayed Iran so many times over the years. The West can't be trusted.

And so they're starting to question those who believe we should give the West one more chance. To do what? To betray Iran again. We in the West don't want to legitimize the legitimate concerns of these more conservative Iranians, so we radicalize them instead. We make anything that's in opposition to the United States and the West seem radical, radicalized. And then we tend to, you know, ignore the patriotic aspects of these people. We call them Islamists, radical Islamists, fundamentalists, extremists, when the reality is most of them aren't. None of them are extreme.

I mean, I believe that Iran is a nation of great faith, and I believe that people who gravitate to positions of leadership—because it is an Islamic republic—are people whose beliefs align with the vision of an Islamic republic. But that doesn't make them extreme Islamists, or fundamentalists, or extremists in the way we use those terms to define Wahhabism, Salafism, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and

things of that nature. In the West, we're incapable of discerning differences. Maybe we're capable of it—we just don't want to, because the truth is complex and we want simplicity. And so we embrace lies. We embrace, you know, inaccurate narratives because it's easier to do so, because we're not really trying to win a debate about the reality of Iran with Iranians.

You know, it's not like—I don't have to convince you. I have to convince the idiot American across the street from me, the idiot American down the road, the idiot American down here—people who are ignorant about it. So the narrative I create doesn't have to be fact-based or conform to reality. It just has to be something that can be readily consumed by an ignorant American public. That's got to be frustrating for you and the people of Iran who are saying, "Wait a minute, we really exist. There's a truth here, there's a reality here." Sadly, in America, we don't care about your truth or your reality. We only care about how we can spin data so it can be consumed politically here in the United States.

#Nima

Part of the negotiations, Scott—since day one, Iran has said that on all fronts there has to be an end to the war. One of those fronts is with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel even had its first direct talks with the Lebanese government, but the outcome of that seems to be that they could end up having a civil war in Lebanon if they go in that direction. What's your understanding of that?

#Scott

My understanding is that Israel currently occupies 22% of Lebanon. So any Lebanese government that negotiates with the Israelis without recognizing that—well, isn't the Lebanese government basically an adjunct of Israel? The fact is, you know, the Lebanese constitution, the vagaries of the French-imposed system of guaranteeing the presidency to a Christian and the prime ministership to a Sunni Muslim, means there's no real democracy. It means Lebanon is governed by factions. And the Christian faction and the Sunni faction, at least as they're represented in government, are factions that have sold out to Israel. They're controlled by Israel. So when we speak of Israel negotiating with the Lebanese government, it's Israel negotiating with itself.

The Lebanese government is incapable of doing that. The notion that Hezbollah, which derives its legitimacy from the very concept of resistance—resistance to Israeli occupation—that Israel can't defeat Hezbollah, so they're turning to the Lebanese and saying, "You have to disarm Hezbollah." So the Lebanese army, instead of confronting the foreign entity that occupies 22% of their soil and is slaughtering their people, is now supposed to, what, turn on Hezbollah? That isn't going to happen. The army won't obey those orders because it understands what the consequences would be. The army cannot defeat Hezbollah in a stand-up fight. And if they try, it will become a civil war. And when it becomes a civil war, you know, suddenly the politics that constrain Hezbollah will no longer exist—and you'll see a different Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is more powerful than the Lebanese army, and they're more powerful than the Israeli army when it comes to defending Lebanese soil. Hezbollah will not be defeated. What we're seeing right now is a game being played by the United States and Lebanon to create perceptions. How this will impact the final peace negotiations—again, I can't speak for the Iranians. I would never seek to speak for the Iranians, and I can't speak for the United States because I'm not in a position to do so. But I do believe that if I were an American negotiator, I could prevail upon the Iranians to recognize that the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict cannot be lumped into the current conflict between Israel, the United States, and Iran. These are two separate issues.

That doesn't mean we're going to give carte blanche to Israel to act, but we have to recognize the reality that we're not going to solve the Lebanese problem today. Therefore, we have to push it off under a different format. We can extend the ceasefire. We can seek a permanent cessation of hostilities between the United States and Iran and extend the ceasefire, understanding that we can't guarantee outcomes here. I think that's a responsible approach. First of all, that's a format that doesn't require Iran to stop funding Hezbollah—which Iran isn't going to do. So I think by treating those as separate, and the same thing with the Houthis—I mean, there are still unresolved issues between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. That conflict hasn't come to an end yet. And I still think I could sit down with the Iranians and say, we have to treat Yemen as a separate issue as well.

We need to solve our fundamental problem. But these issues are far more complex—they involve players outside the framework of our conflict. So we need to come up with an effective mechanism for continued engagement to resolve these conflicts. And I would tell the Iranians, without forestalling your ability to move forward, I want sanctions lifted against Iran. I would say that as an American negotiator: I want those sanctions lifted. We can't lift those sanctions if we're tying in Yemen and Lebanon, because these problems aren't going to be solved overnight. If we tie them in, that means this thing will drag out forever. We need to conclude our problems so that you can get sanctions lifted and we can move on with whatever we have to do in the region.

And we need to agree that we're all going to come in. Maybe we can talk about frameworks. Maybe we can get Chinese mediators. Maybe we can do some things to change the dynamic. Because if I were the Iranians, I'd say, so you're just proposing we keep doing what we did before, which didn't work and only led to Israeli and American attacks on Yemen and Lebanon. So I think it would be wise to talk about bringing in other parties to facilitate these negotiations—the Chinese, the Russians, and so on—to de-emphasize the American role. I mean, how stupid is it to have the United States, together with Lebanon and Israel, negotiate the future of Hezbollah? It's just ridiculous framing. Anyway, that's that.

#Nima

Hezbollah is not Hamas. Hezbollah is something beyond that. Everybody knows the role Hezbollah plays in Lebanon.

#Scott

Hezbollah defeated the Israelis in 2000. They fought them to a standstill in 2006, and they're beating them today. So, you know, yeah—Hezbollah is Hezbollah. It's not going away anytime soon.

#Nima

Scott, I think the war in the Middle East has somehow changed the whole calculation for Russia, China, and Europe. After the war in Ukraine—which was a total blow to the European economy—they've been suffering a lot. And then the war in the Middle East came along. You can see how they're suffering as time goes by, especially with what's happening in the Strait of Hormuz, for example. How do you see the way Donald Trump tried to put pressure on Saudi Arabia? This is the first time I've seen the Saudi foreign minister say, "No, we're going to decide our own policy. Our policy will be based on our calculation, not the calculation of the Trump administration." I've never seen Saudi Arabia talk this way. And how do you see the influence that the war has had on the calculations of the GCC countries?

#Scott

I mean, we have a study in contrast. We have Saudi Arabia, which appears to be more reality-based, saying, you know, "We get to make these decisions." The United Arab Emirates is purely a tool of the United States. I mean, they sent a senior delegation to China to try to put pressure on China to drop its support for Iran. And I've never seen more public humiliation in my entire life than when the Chinese put the UAE delegation in its place. You don't tell the dragon what to do. The reality is that the world has changed, and the United States can no longer project itself as this superpower—the last remaining superpower, the unchecked guarantor of security that nobody would dare challenge because of our overwhelming military and economic strength.

And now we have, today, the reality that Iran has successfully stood up to the United States militarily, and, uh, the United States hasn't broken them economically. The world is a far more complicated, nuanced place, with strengths having been accrued in China, Russia, and elsewhere that the United States can't overcome. You know, the Gulf Arab nations, which have, for now—what, four decades?—bought into the Carter Doctrine, which was, you know, America guarantees security, but then you guarantee your foreign policies will align with the United States. You know, there were...

#Scott

There we go. They're waking up to the fact that the United States no longer gets to dictate outcomes, and it can no longer provide guarantees. So they have to adjust to this. Some adjust more rapidly than others. I think Saudi Arabia is starting to see the light, and the United Arab Emirates continues to wallow in its own ignorance.

#Nima

Let's assume they reach some kind of agreement in the negotiations between Iran and the United States. Is that going to mark a new era of cooperation between the U.S. and other countries?

#Scott

The United States is incapable of cooperating with other countries under Donald Trump. So I think you're going to see that this negotiation is the exception, not the rule. The only way the United States is going to come up with significant policy deviations that could be called, you know, trending toward normal, is through defeat. If the United States isn't challenged, then we'll continue doing what we've been doing—the path of least resistance—under the belief that America can get away with literally anything. But as we're challenged and as we fail, we have to adapt. And I think Iran is the first of what will probably be many adaptations that take place over the next several years. But this isn't the United States learning how to get along with its neighbors; it's the United States being compelled by the weight of its failures to readjust.

#Nima

Thank you so much, Scott, for being with us today. A great pleasure, as always.

#Scott

Thank you very much for having me. I hope you're feeling better.

#Nima

Thank you. See you soon, Scott. Bye-bye.