

Scott Ritter: Covert Talks: The Secret Deal to Stop War

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#Nima

What is happening near the Strait of Hormuz, with 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, implying that traffic is flowing freely through the Strait of Hormuz and that the Iranians no longer have control over the strait. Then we compare that with reporting out of Iran, which says they're very much in control of the strait, that they're collecting their tariffs, and that only ships paying those tariffs are able to transit. According to them, there's been virtually no interruption of Iranian shipping or shipping coming from Iranian ports.

So, you know, we have conflicting narratives. I would say I support the Iranian narrative because it seems more reality-based. The notion—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 there.

But the fact is, the United States can operate close to the Iranian shore—and is not operating close to the Iranian shore. Their ships operate at a standoff, which creates a huge buffer zone for the transit of shipping that's 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. So, you know, it's impossible to say. I've always said that this blockade is pure political theater.

#Scott

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. I've always said this.

#Scott

Yeah, it was designed to create the perception of American prowess, American power, so that Trump can more effectively engage in negotiations—which are ongoing, by the way. I mean, people should understand that there was never, you know, 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 Chinese stuff. But if Trump wants to take credit, you know, look—China doesn't care. I don't think Iran cares about 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, you know, there will have to be some—I guess—political compromises made on the part of Iran. And 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, I think he wishes he'd never gotten involved in.

Um, you know, I smile not because—because, you know, 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 those 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, you know, 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 effectively. You know, we sank surface warfare ships that were never going to challenge the United States to begin with. So we carried out a naval campaign that had no real impact on the reality that Iran's Navy was more than just some surface ships. Right now, it has ballistic missile and drone capabilities that allow it to control the Strait of Hormuz and project power off Iranian shores to keep the U.S. Navy at bay. So which navy really won that conflict?

#Nima

Do you see Donald Trump recognizing his mistakes? Because he had some kind of agenda, some sort 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 tried to do is push those mistakes onto the shoulders of others. And there will be heads that roll because of this. You know, it'll be interesting 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. And 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. And 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. Like, "Isn't it obvious you've been defeated?" But Donald Trump doesn't understand warfare at this point, because blowing up empty buildings—or blowing up buildings that have 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 models 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. Yeah, we haven't accomplished anything. Iran is producing missiles—producing missiles. It's not just that they retain missiles; they're producing missiles as we speak. So we haven't impacted their missile production facilities.

What we've done is blow up a lot of facilities 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. The Defense Department, slash War Department, 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 stake their claim.

#Nima

Scott, before this war started, you remember you and I were talking about what the objectives of the war would be—what they would actually 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 maybe they were 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—if I'm collecting, I do a collection management plan. I'm given a problem. The way intelligence is supposed to work 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? How does Iran plan to safeguard missile production? 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 assigns human resources, technical resources, imagery resources—all of that—to the problem, and then I start collecting information. As I collect information, I can refine my assessments and ask new questions. But if you do a good job, you should come up with an answer. And, you know, then you brief your boss. Now, the boss will ask follow-on 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 see it differently—you know, if they don't make their boss happy, they don't get promoted. If they don't get promoted, their career's 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, you know, 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 ended up with an imperfect assessment. The assessment that Trump received from Netanyahu and the Mossad chief on February 11th might have been valid in June, July, maybe August, but it started to get dated by 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 originally briefed to the boss that 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." And 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." Anderson comes back: "Scott's overemphasizing this." And they start to smother the assessments. Then what happens is maybe a little bit gets through so they can blame this person or 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. and its intelligence gathering? Because we know that when the war started, Donald Trump said he was surprised by the Iranian attack on the GCC countries. But part of that involved attacks on radars, and part of it targeted CIA and Mossad offices in the region. How did that affect the whole concept of gathering information?

#Scott

Well, I mean, it complicates things. You have resources everywhere. I think the human intelligence dimension was severely disrupted, but it was always going to be, because you have peacetime human intelligence collection, which 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. And hopefully, from the Iranian perspective, they took that into consideration.

Um, 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, can 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 much time to be cute—they're going to be doing stuff. So 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 things change every day. 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 that fiction. Nobody has the guts to go before the president and say, "Everything you were told was a lie. 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 won't be allowed into the White House. 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 work, are fired, relieved, or reassigned. I'm counting ping-pong balls in Alaska instead of doing what I'm supposed to do. Because with these assessments, you can't do 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 ten-year window of tariffs or tolls so that it's not permanent, so you're not threatening international law of the sea and all 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 terms of—well, there's a mechanism that could come into play where it's about reconstruction, you know, 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, right? Which is important—politically important. I know all the non-Americans out there are saying, "Pound sand, we don't care."

But 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 the 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 get the investments in there. This is all good for the people of Iran if this 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 at this point. 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 politics are involved—and they're colored by an upcoming midterm election, which is all about Trump's political legacy—everything now has to go through a political filter. And that just complicates things so much.