

Prof. Ted Postol: Hormuz Hostage: The Truth Behind the Nuclear Hype

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#Nima

The latest news on what is happening between the United States, Iran, and Israel. And here is what we've learned so far. Iran has opened up the Strait of Hormuz. All these commercial vessels can pass through the Strait of Hormuz under the control of the Iranian government. They're controlling everything, even the route, the way that, you know, the path through which they're going, these tankers. On the other hand, we've seen the United States announcing a ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon. And the latest news today is from the Iranian Tasnim News Agency, which is an official, you know, it's so connected with the government in Iran. They said that Iran was prepared to hit, to attack Israel last night at 8 p.m.

Because one of the main conditions before this ceasefire happening between Iran, the United States, and Israel was that the war should end on all fronts, which wasn't the case so far. So Iran said, we're going to get back. Then the United States—it was the deadline for the Iranians. They said at 8 p.m. last night, but Donald Trump had announced 8 p.m. Iranian local time in Iran. And Donald Trump announced the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon at 7 p.m. Iran time. How do you see the situation, Ted? Looking at the chaos, you see some sort of new—you know, every time you hear Donald Trump, he comes out with something new. And I don't know, we are so tired of these sorts of surprises, this sort of, you know, unrealistic instability on the part of Donald Trump. What is your understanding when it comes to Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu?

#Ted

Well, first of all, let me say that I've been traveling, and some of these details are new to me, unfortunately, because I've just been so busy traveling. But the problem that Trump has is that he has started something he has no chance of resolving on favorable terms to himself. It just boils down to that. And the Iranians are in the driver's seat. In fact, it's interesting that they announced that they would be attacking at 8 o'clock, and at 7, all of a sudden, the Israelis agreed not to continue murdering people in southern Lebanon. That's an interesting result. I don't know how long it will persist. The Israelis are taking a terrible beating from the Iranian drones and ballistic missiles.

And the Israelis have controlled the press very efficiently. But every time you get a glimpse under the tent, you find out that there's evidence of very substantial stress in Israeli society—damage—and people are simply not able to function at night. They're in shelters. They can't function during the day because there can be attacks at any time. And there's a large amount of general damage, and it's not like—you can't make the place look like Gaza because you can't deliver the incredibly enormous amounts of munitions that the Israelis have been able to deliver over months with aircraft bombing and destroying things on the ground.

But there is a lot of damage, and there's enough damage that when an air raid occurs, you are not going to ignore it. I mean, it's not as if a bomb goes off somewhere in the city and, you know, the odds are very high that you'll not be involved. There's enough damage being done in each raid that you have to take—unless you have a death wish—you're going to take shelter. It's just, you know, it's your life, and you're just not going to play with it this way. And so people take shelter, and this completely disrupts every aspect of their lives. And the stress, from what I'm able to understand, is beginning to show in the society in general.

Now, I assume—I don't know—I assume that this is a source of pressure on Netanyahu. I know that he has been giving speeches saying, "Just hang on, you know, we'll be fine. You know, we're about to win," you know, that kind of nonsense. Really, it is nonsense. But my guess is people are no longer buying it, and he's looking at—I don't know if you would call it a revolt—but a serious loss in support. He's got an election coming up, and he's probably worried about that. And so this may be influencing his behavior with regard to Lebanon. My guess, and it's only a guess, is that as soon as he feels he's free from some of these pressures, he's going to go back at Lebanon.

I mean, he's going to go. And the Iranians are going to do what they have said they will do, which is to renew their attacks on Israel and American military bases in the Gulf. So it would be nice if I'm wrong, but what the Iranians want is unrealistic given the behavior of the United States. It's not unrealistic—it's appropriate, in my view. What they want is to be left alone. They want to have these outrageous economic sanctions lifted. They want to be able to go about building their society free of being attacked militarily and free of being attacked economically, through these attacks where the American Secretary of the Treasury is involved with the intelligence organizations to try to devalue their currency.

You know, this is just, you know, if you're Iranian, I can understand. I mean, I can understand how you're just totally fed up. And so I think that Iran, as soon as the Americans or the Israelis do something that is not consistent with the ceasefire agreement that the Iranians understood was going to happen—which included, of course, that Israel would not be carpet bombing southern Lebanon—as soon as that ends in some way or other, the ceasefire is going to be over. And my expectation is it will be over, you know, unpredictably, but not very long from now. The Iranians can persist. They have the missiles. In fact, in some sense, the ceasefire is—I mean, people talk about the ceasefire being good for the Americans because they're resupplying, but they don't have a lot to resupply with.

They're running out of weapons to send, let alone, you know—yeah, you can resupply, but you have to have the weapons to send. And the Americans are in bad shape. The Americans are taking weapons out of countries like Japan and South Korea. And this is not a benefit to American alliances because the Japanese and South Koreans are looking at this and they're saying, you're taking these weapons out because you're trying to defend Israel. And you started this war and you claim you're defending us, but in fact, you're showing your priorities, and your priorities don't include us in a serious way. I know the South Koreans are very disturbed.

They've been disturbed about this for a long time because I have contacts in South Korea, and I know for a fact that they have been very concerned about the nature of the American commitment to South Korea. And, you know, things are generally moving in the wrong direction for the United States and will continue to do so. So from Iran's point of view, it seems to me that the ceasefire works better for them than it does for the United States because, you know, the pressures of the potential drop in oil supplies are still there. And the Iranians can shut the strait anytime they choose to, and probably they will the moment the ceasefire ends. That's my expectation. I don't see why not. I'm just trying to put myself in the position of the Iranians.

#Nima

You're right, because they mentioned that today. They mentioned the point that you just made, that at the end of the ceasefire, everything's going to end.

#Ted

They're going to close the Strait of Hormuz. Yeah. Why would you give up this lever that you have, given the insincerity of the American and Israeli conduct toward you, and having suffered all of these economic sanctions and military attacks and loss of life, why would you not just return to a full-scale war? Especially because you're the one who's going to benefit most from it. You're going to be able to put the pressure back on, and it's going to be just as bad. In fact, it's going to be worse, because the air defenses have not had any significant capability against the ballistic missiles. But they have had capability against the drones because the drones are slow-moving and they are viable targets. In fact, they're somewhat easier to shoot at. Not necessarily.

Well, they're somewhat easier to shoot at when you see them than aircraft. They are not necessarily easier to know they're coming because when they fly low, they have small radar cross-sections. I described in the last session we had why, when they're low, the radars have this phenomenon called clutter, which are reflections off the ground and buildings and waves that are coming in off the water. And those reflections are very large relative to the reflection from the drone. So it's extremely difficult to see these things at long enough range. By the time you see them, it's also very difficult to bring to bear interceptors. And of course, now that you're running out of interceptors, you don't have any resources to use to stop these drones, and they're getting better all the time.

They now have two-way communication that's unimpeded. So you can literally have a person sitting in Iran seeing exactly what the television camera on the drone sees and guiding the drone in, in real time. I mean, you know, this extra communications capability is now built into probably all of the more modernized drones. And, you know, when you have that capability, you can do damage to anything you choose. And you don't have as big a warhead, but it doesn't matter because you can hit exactly where you want to. The damage from the warhead can be amplified. And if you want to do larger areas of damage, you have several drones come in. And since you know where the damage occurred with the earlier drones, you can be very specific in targeting areas where you want to increase damage or do more damage.

So it's not a winnable situation from the point of view of the Israelis or the Americans. So I think this ceasefire is not going to work. It would be nice if it did, but it has to work. There's no way it will work unless the Americans and the Israelis find some way to guarantee the Iranians that they're going to be left alone in the future. If I were Iranian, my attitude would simply be what I believe the Iranian attitudes are. My attitude would be, well, I have time. I have an infinite amount of time at this point. I have enough drones to keep going as long as I want to. I have thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of these things. If I don't have thousands, I will have thousands because I can build them very fast.

Ballistic missiles are a little harder to build on short notice, but I can still build significant numbers of ballistic missiles as I'm going along. And I'm surely getting help from the Russians and Chinese. And so my capacity to build—if there are limitations on it now, those limitations are going to become less so. They're going to be smaller and less problematic. And the Russians have a big incentive to provide help to the Iranians, if nothing else because the Israelis have made it clear to the Americans that you give all these missiles to Ukraine, and then they're your missiles that are being used to attack us in Russia. And we're not going to put up with it. And the Russians clearly, clearly made it very clear that if the situation comes up where the Russians can help someone attack American interests, they will help.

They made it very clear. So the idea that all of a sudden someone's surprised that the Russians are doing this is ridiculous. I mean... so, um, and things are going to get a lot worse in Ukraine because there's no munitions for Ukraine now either. You just—you can't ship things you don't have. And, uh, and that's going on in Ukraine now, and, uh, you know, all of the vectors point in the wrong way from the American point of view. And Trump, even in his dim-witted understanding of the world, has to see that. There's evidence that he does see it. Now, he's a megalomaniac. He's probably suffering from some kind of dementia—if not, it may be stress-related, but it could be dementia too. It could be physical, just because of his age, which is my age, incidentally. So maybe I'm going to be suffering from dementia next time.

#Nima

But you're right.

#Ted

But he's got Netanyahu there, who's just as crazy as he is, but in a different way. But still, you know, Netanyahu has no interest in helping out Trump—none at all. He will use Trump and throw him away if he can. His problem is simply that he needs Trump, and he can't go too far over the edge and get a reaction from Trump. But Trump, on the other hand, is owned by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—AIPAC—and these ultra-wealthy Jews who are ultra... I don't like using Zionism as a word, but I think it's correct. The ultra-nationalists who are willing to literally murder all kinds of innocent people—families, and, you know, children—and, you know, forget about women and men, but, I mean, it's just horrifying, this attitude these people have.

And given that they have this attitude and they have a lot of money and can influence in a dramatic way the political decision-making in the United States, we have an American political system that prioritizes Israeli ideas about what Israeli security is over American ideas about what American security should be. I mean, what we are doing now, we the Americans are now doing, is definitely not in our national security interests. You know, we're alienating all our allies, we're expending munitions that, you know, if you want to argue you have legitimate defense needs, we're using it all up by giving it to these absolutely maniacal Israelis who are using it to bomb innocent civilians. This is not in the American interest.

And it's against Judeo-Christian ethics, which incidentally, from my friends, relations with people who are Muslims—and I do have a bunch of friends who are Muslims—is not very different from, you know, the Muslim principles of being moral and kind and generous. So it just contradicts all of the moral values of everybody, whatever their religious backgrounds are. And yet we're doing it. We are co-belligerents. And, you know, I don't see how this thing is going to persist. I just, I hope I'm wrong. But when I say I hope I'm wrong, I mean I am inferring that this problem of Iran being constantly attacked, both economically and militarily, will be solved. So if I'm wrong and there's a ceasefire that continues and Iran achieves the reasonable objectives that it's aiming at, fine.

I think that's good for everybody, good for the world. If the Israelis don't like it, tough luck. You're a small country. You survive because the Americans have this fantastic preoccupation with funding you and supporting you. You have behaved in a criminal way. The country has behaved in a criminal way. And it's about time for you to fess up and start acting like a member of the world community who's responsible. So I'm, you know, I don't think that's going to happen. I hope I'm wrong. I really hope I'm wrong, but I don't think that's going to happen. And if it doesn't happen, we're going to be back at it again. The Iranians are going to be back at it. So that's my best guess of what's going on now, of what the situation is.

#Nima

There are reports, Ted, that they're talking about the United States preparing for a massive attack on Iran for days. And they're talking about it because the United States was moving, sending a lot of weapons. In the reports, there have been over 75 U.S. logistic flights into the Gulf since the ceasefire started. So from what has happened so far militarily, what are they seeking if that happens?

#Ted

I don't know what they're going to bomb. They're going to bomb more hospitals? They're going to bomb more girls' schools? I mean, what do these people think they're doing? The real military capacity of Iran right now is all in underground tunnels. There is no way of getting at those underground tunnels. I've studied tunnels because, I think I mentioned, I was on this weird Department of Energy committee that looked at this in the 80s, well before there was any issue of Iran or not the focus of it. It was just a general preoccupation with, we have all these other people out there, they have tunnels, we want to be able to threaten them. It was just ridiculous. There was no technology that could be found. There were a lot of wasted American taxpayer dollars in ridiculous studies that I criticized to the point they threw me off the committee.

But there's no way to get at the tunnels. And Iran has done a spectacular engineering job. It's been deeply thought through. Every time I see one of these photographs, I say, wow, these guys know what they're doing. And you're not going to be able to destroy these tunnels, given the people who built them knew what they were doing. There's just no way around it. And as long as they have these tunnels, they can manufacture things inside them. They can continue storing anything they manufacture. They can continue launching missiles, and you can attack the exits, and then they can launch the missile again later. You know, you just have no way of stopping them. So from the Iranian point, I don't know what this massive attack is going to do.

I have no idea what you're going to bomb unless you're going to just do more general murder of innocent civilians and attack more universities and, you know, I mean, attacking universities. I mean, gee whiz, I mean, schools. I mean, what do you think you're doing? I mean, you know, you're trying to win a war or you're trying to destroy the society you're going up against. That's, you know, that has no—there's no moral defense of this. There's no way to morally argue for this. So I don't know if there's a new attack being planned. I mean, the evidence certainly points to it. But I don't know what they're going to attack. We're going to say we're going to just continue destroying your hospitals, your schools, and hope that you'll be upset enough about it that you'll stop.

That's not going to stop the Iranians. They realize that they're in a fight for their life, and they'll eat the pain. They're tough people. They've been through a lot. They have thousands of years of civilization that they're very proud of. I mean, I have some Iranian friends. They're very proud of their civilization. That's important because that's part of the culture, the mindset. You're not going to push these people over the edge to a surrender. No way. So all you're going to do is kill more people, expend more munitions, and you're going to have no effect. Well, the effect you're likely to

have is the Iranians will double down yet further on keeping up the pressure in the form of these ballistic missile and drone attacks. It seems to me that that's the natural thing they'll do.

#Nima

The other point, Ted, which is part of your work and you understand well when it comes to those, is the use of nukes and nuclear weapons and the threat of using nuclear weapons. The basic, you know, this war started on this understanding. And Donald Trump keeps saying that we want to get rid of—you know, Iran was going—even he was attacking the Pope. He said that the Pope doesn't understand. We attacked Iran because Iran was on the verge of producing nuclear weapons. That's why we attacked Iran.

#Ted

I think the president caught this. You have to correct me now. I thought the president was now saying there are no more nuclear weapons to worry about. Didn't he just switch on this one? Either there are nuclear weapons to worry about or there aren't. I mean, what is he talking about? Am I right? I think I heard that the other day. I've been traveling, so I just got off a plane yesterday.

#Nima

He literally is talking about that Iran was building nuclear weapons, that I attacked them and they destroyed everything. Right now, that's because of the attack. Absolutely, could achieve everything with their time. And the Pope doesn't understand that. That's why he's picking—he has picked a fight with the Pope. He said, if I wasn't the president of the United States, you wouldn't be in your position. It's amazing, the whole case of Donald Trump. But considering the—yeah, go ahead.

#Ted

No, no, I mean, it's just, you know, there isn't a religious leader in the world this guy hasn't infuriated. Yeah. You know, it doesn't matter who you talk to—Jews, you know, the progressive Jews, Catholics, Islamic people, Muslims—you know, it's incredible. He's just, you know, anyway, he's, I mean, all of his political support is nearly gone. I mean, he's only got a very, very low percentage of people supporting him. And the congressional elections are unpredictable, but I don't rule out that the Democrats will retake the Senate along with the House. The House, to me, is just—there's nothing to talk about. It's going to be a landslide.

They're going to lose—the Republicans are going to lose a tremendous amount in the House. But if they lose the Senate too, which is less of a clear outcome, that will really be bad for the Trump presidency, because I think he will be impeached by this new—if the House and Senate go. And he may escape the consequences of impeachment, but I'm not so sure these days, because people are pretty fed up. And he's got his own MAGA people, you know, the Make America Great Again people.

They are surprisingly committed to their principles. I mean, I don't agree with much of what MAGA argues for, but I have to give them credit for standing by their principles.

And their principles included no more wars—no more wars, spending of national treasure on wars that get us nowhere and just impoverish us and cause us to lose the ability to work in the world. And they're angry about that, and good for them. Again, I could disagree with people, but I am a person who believes strongly that you should respect people's views, unless they're talking hatred or bigotry or violence—then I can't go along with that. But if you're talking something that I basically disagree with, well, you know, I'm an American citizen. If you're an American citizen and you have this view, I'll debate it with you. And, you know, I may ultimately not come to agreement with you, but I'm not going to hate you.

I'm not going to treat you as a criminal unless you're arguing for criminal things. So, you know, that's my attitude toward American citizens that I'm in debate with or I deal with. And, you know, I don't like this business of saying this person is a MAGA person and hence they're unethical, they're monstrous. They have different judgments about certain things than I do. I don't agree with those judgments, but, you know, we're citizens. We're trying to navigate our way to build a country that's just and fair to a large number of people. And we don't have that country. I mean, if I look at, for example, China's leadership, it's an autocratic state.

So if I have a home and the Chinese want to build a highway that would go through where my home was, I don't have all kinds of options to stop them. I would in the United States. I may not succeed, but I can do that. The autocratic state will give me money, and they'll give me what they think is a fair amount of money. I know this for a fact because I was in China talking to people who were in this situation. I had some former students of mine. I asked them to take me out into the Chinese countryside. I wanted to see Chinese people, and they took me to a place where the people were all going to be moved out. And they weren't afraid of the government.

They were bellyaching about it. They didn't say they wouldn't obey the government. They didn't question the government's right to do it, but they spoke freely, and they were being paid some money and provided alternative homes. They didn't like it, but the country is an autocracy, and it could do it. On the other hand, the autocracy, the leadership, is aiming at raising everybody's economic level and opportunity in the country, helping everybody live a better life. That's the objective. And you look at things that the autocracy does.

I mean, it arbitrarily raises the amount of money, the salaries of everybody, because it wants to. You know, it says we've reached a point now where we should raise salaries so that people have more money to buy consumer items. That wasn't what happened in the United States. What happened in the United States is we passed a bill that gave all the people who needed no more money—all these billionaires—more money, at the cost of people's health services, the cost of people's security,

financial security. And that's not a government that's doing the best for its people. So you can tell me, oh, we're better because we're free, whatever that means. I don't know what free means in this case.

I mean, I'm free in the sense that nobody's going to come and knock down the door of my home and come in and beat me up and arrest me. However, I'm educated and I'm white. If I were not white, let me tell you, you know, I have friends who are Black. I don't just say this—I have real friends who are Black, over many years. And, you know, they don't feel that way. And they are right. You know, there is the evidence to show that. So what's all this stuff about freedom versus autocracy? You know, it's just ridiculous. I mean, there are differences. I prefer my society to living in China, if that were my choice. But I'm not Chinese. I'm not a product of their culture. You know, I don't speak their language.

I have great regard for their culture and them. But, you know, the United States is my home. I'm an American. And as I joke with all my foreign friends, I'm an American redneck. But, you know, this has nothing to do with freedom and democracy versus autocracy, this nonsense that this guy Mike McFaul spouts all the time. I mean, it's ridiculous. He runs a center that's not free at all. He runs a center that's an academic shithole. I mean, literally. I mean, there's no way to carry on an open debate in this place, but he's for freedom. I mean, I've never seen anything so repressive in all my career in an American academic institution. But he's for freedom. So anyway, that's the situation we're in.

#Nima

Yeah.

#Ted

Yes.

#Nima

You may go to the second part of our discussion. Yes.

#Ted

And I was about to say, speaking of freedom and academic integrity, I had quite an experience on my trip from Germany on the airplane because the airplanes now have reasonably good Internet support. And so I'm sitting there, and the first thing I get is an article that was just published by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists that, if I want to be... It was so inaccurate that it wasn't even wrong. I mean, it was just completely without merit. And of course, a day later—I'll show you this in some slides—a day later, I get an email explaining to me how the Bulletin is this source of expert

scientific information. And give them money. You should give them money. Because they are real experts, and they are informing our society about the critical national security issues that we should all be concerned about.

So it's quite an interesting set of issues that have come up. Let me—why don't you just show slide number one. Okay. So there are serious errors and misinformation in this Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists article about a false alert that occurred in 1995 in Russia. It was an alert. I'll discuss it in some detail, depending on how much time we have. And the article said nothing correct about this false alert—nothing. And it provided no information about what the false alert was. Instead, it had all kinds of discussions about how this false alert occurred when the Russians were losing a war in Chechnya, how the Russian economic downturn—all of these things that had nothing at all to do with this false alert—were somehow rolled into this article as somehow being associated with the false alert.

It was just amazing. It was a totally amazing fabrication of irrelevant things that may have occurred at the same time but had nothing to do with the false alert. It was just remarkable. Now, in all fairness, I want to take a moment to point out that this article was written by two very young, very junior people. I won't talk much about them, but I'm a little concerned, quite honestly, because they did such a bad job. I feel bad for them because these people are young scholars, and you could argue they should have known better, but my first question is, since I'm an educator, how did their supervisors or the people they deal with let them do this? What was the role? I mean, one of them's from Princeton.