

# Amb. Chas Freeman: US-IRAN: ESCALATION IMMINENT?

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## #Nima

Then let me play a clip of Donald Trump talking about what's going on. Maybe that will somehow help us understand.

## #Guest

It is booming. You know, you don't read about it. You don't see it so much because of what's going on in Iran, which is really, you know, it's been two months. I mean, two months. You've been in other wars for 18 years, four years with me. I'm in there for a month. Well, he said he'd get out in a month. Did you see where I did a list last week? Seventeen years in Vietnam, five years in Afghanistan, and more, much more than that, in all these different places. And I said we're in there for two months. And you know what? We're going to have victory very shortly. This is not.

## #Guest

And against a very tough, smart country. These people were fighters. And, you know, I don't want to claim it before the fact, but they have no Navy left. 158 ships at the bottom of the sea. 158. Think of it. 158. I got angry. I said, why didn't you save them? We could have used them, you know. They would rather shoot them than save them. I said, what the hell? It's only money. But some of them were good. They had one named Soleimani. You know Soleimani? We took him out. He was the worst, one of the worst terrorists in the history of this country, this world. They killed many of our people.

## #Nima

Is that going to help us understand what's going on?

## #Chas

I'm afraid it doesn't help at all. It's rambling, incoherent, delusional, and it's more and more apparent that President Trump has lost touch with reality. And so we see now increasing demands from both sides of the political aisle in the United States, asking to invoke the 25th Amendment and remove him from office on the grounds that he's unfit for office. Some of the things he says are so totally detached from reality that it's quite unnerving to hear him. But anyway, he keeps implying that there is about to be some further evidence of victory. He defines victory as the destruction of Iran's almost non-existent navy and its almost non-existent air force, and the huge amount of damage that the United States has done to civilian infrastructure in Iran, which is a war crime.

He doesn't seem to be bothered at all, as he said, by international law or other constraints. There is a sort of ceasefire now in effect in Lebanon, um, and I say "sort of" a ceasefire because typically, uh, when the Trump administration tries to do deals, they don't agree on the terms of the deal. They just make an announcement that something has been agreed, and there's been no meeting of the minds under it. And it's very clear that the original ceasefire proposal by Pakistan included Lebanon. It's also clear that Israel had no desire to respect that. It's apparent that the current so-called ceasefire in Lebanon is not respected by Israel. Israeli politicians have apparently been outraged by Donald Trump's premature announcement of that ceasefire. We don't know what is backing it up.

Israel's still occupying southern Lebanon, what's left of it. It's turned southern Lebanon basically into a wasteland, applying the same technique it applied in Gaza. So I'm not sure what sort of victory this is. Iran has not capitulated. It will not capitulate. Hezbollah has not capitulated. It will not capitulate. Hamas has not capitulated. It will not capitulate. What victory are we talking about? A very strange idea of the purpose of war, as though the sole purpose of war is to kill people and destroy buildings. I thought the purpose of war was to make an adjustment in relations or policies on the part of the enemy — in other words, to break the will of the enemy and to have the enemy do what you want. But not a single stated objective of either Israel or the United States has been achieved so far. No victory. It's very hard to know what he's talking about.

## **#Nima**

We had Reuters reporting from a Pakistani source. They were involved in the mediation. They told Reuters that the back-channel diplomacy has made progress, with an upcoming meeting potentially leading to a memorandum of understanding and a broader deal within 60 days. This is what is happening. On the part of the Iranians, when you look at the Persian media, domestic media, you don't see any sign of optimism. They know what's going on. They're getting ready for a new round of the war, and they feel that it's going to happen anytime soon. And on the other hand, when you look at what the United States has done so far since the ceasefire started, we've had more than 75 US logistic flights going to the region.

## **#Nima**

Right.

## **#Nima**

And together with 10,000 soldiers and all of them, we have the USS aircraft carrier George H.W. Bush heading to the region, not going from the Red Sea, but the other way. And what does it mean to you?

## **#Chas**

Well, you know, there are many people who predict there will be some kind of military action this weekend. That is the phony ceasefire. There is no ceasefire, really. There's a claim of a ceasefire, which is convenient for Donald Trump. But there is no ceasefire. This phony ceasefire will be broken by an American attack of some sort on Iran, to which Iran, as you indicate, is far from depleting its missile arsenal, and it will resume bombing Israel and possibly the Gulf Arabs too. Although there is communication going on between the Gulf Arabs and Iran. We know the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, has been in touch with Foreign Minister Al-Aqsi or his deputy. We know that Qatar has been trying to do some sort of deal with Iran.

It's very interesting that in mentioning problems with American basing in the region, Kuwait is not mentioned by Iran. That suggests something is going on under the table. We don't know. The UAE has actually reestablished communication with Iran, and of course, Oman never broke it. So there is local action. I think the Pakistani claim of progress in the back-channel messaging doesn't have a great deal of credibility. I can understand why they would want to say that and why the Trump administration would like that. And let me lay out a theory. One is, of course, that Pakistan does deserve a great deal of credit for bringing the warring parties together—not Israel, of course, but the United States and Iran.

And even more credit for engaging, getting them into a direct meeting rather than the kind of proximity talks or indirect talks that have been the case in the past. Pakistan deserves credit, yes. Pakistan is continuing to try to play a mediating role. Why not? This is very good for Pakistan. It is backed by China, which is Pakistan's backer in many things. It is exploiting the personal relationship between Hassan Mounir and the head of the Pakistani Armed Forces and Donald Trump. And it makes Pakistan the center of attention in a positive way, whereas Pakistan had been pretty isolated. As far as the Trump administration is concerned, you know, whether there's an attack this weekend or not, the mention of 60 days is significant, it seems to me, because what Trump wants to do desperately is get out of this war.

And if he can claim there's a negotiation going on, somehow there's a peace process, and, you know, we beat the Iranians and so forth, and they're defeated, and now they're having to talk to us and all kinds of other nonsense, then he can posture before the American electorate, you know, I won the war, you know, they're talking to me, and we're trying to work out a deal. Progress is being

made, as the Pakistanis claim. There doesn't have to be any reality to that at all. It's a bit like the mines in the Strait of Hormuz. We don't know if there are any mines or not. There may be no mines at all. Imaginary mines are just as good at scaring insurance companies as real ones. And imaginary peace talks are just as good at fooling the stock market and the American public as real talks. So this is really a supreme instance of the strange world we now live in, in which absolutely nothing is verifiable.

We don't know what is going on. We don't even know, by the way, how this so-called blockade by the United States Navy is going. They have not apparently boarded any ships. They have been successful in redirecting, I think, 12 ships. It's not clear whether the Chinese-flagged vessels pay any attention to them or not. Clearly, the U.S. doesn't want a war with China. And what the Navy is doing is not legal. It is essentially an act of piracy and has been called out for that. So what is going on? We don't know. And the appearance is that there's a blockade. Now, let me just finish on the blockade issue. You know, before this war, the Strait of Hormuz was open, and it was an international waterway. And nobody controlled it. It was under international law.

Now it's under Iranian sovereignty and control. So it's closed, partially. Think of it like a door. The door is partly open. There's somebody behind it who looks out. If I like you, I'll let you in. If I don't like you, you can stay away. So what does Donald Trump do? He shuts the door and locks it. This is absurd because basically what it does is maximize the impact on the global economy, hurt virtually every country in the world one way or another. And it's so nonsensical that it appears to be insane. So it does nothing for the United States. It also does nothing for Israel, by the way, because Israel is now completely isolated diplomatically. And it just lost its main—you know, it had a veto in the European Union through Viktor Orbán.

Viktor Orbán is now retired from politics, probably. He's still young enough to continue, but I don't think we'll see him again in a position of authority. And so this war, which has not stopped—it's in a lull, that's all—may sputter out with phony peace talks, phony ceasefires, you know, phony ones which people follow if they want and don't follow if they don't want. It's very clear that Israel does not want an end to this war because Mr. Netanyahu will be in jail if the war is over. And he's quite determined not to be in jail. And if you know anything about Israeli jails, you would understand why he would not want to be in an Israeli jail. So I'm not sure where we are. I guess we just have to, as Donald Trump often says, wait and see, you know?

**#Nima**

Yeah.

**#Nima**

Ambassador, with the blockade, as you've mentioned, we had some sort of data coming out of what has happened, coming out of this situation. And we have the TankerTrackers database, and we saw

that since the ceasefire started, Iran has exported more than 11 million barrels of oil, which wasn't receiving any sort of, you know, challenge from the United States, any sort of difficulties from the United States.

## **#Chas**

That's why I say that, you know, we don't know whether this ceasefire is anything but the manipulation of perceptions, you know, not real. Apparently, modern warfare, whether it's in Ukraine or in West Asia, is full of the manipulation of perceptions. And, you know, you just don't know. You know, it's not the fog of war. It's the fog of the manipulation of opinion deliberately that we're seeing.

## **#Nima**

And as you've mentioned, they have managed to, you know, force some of the Iranian vessels to go back. But that phone call that you mentioned between the Iranian foreign minister and the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, I think, was mostly related to the blockade. And they were telling Saudi Arabia, because Saudi Arabia is using the pipeline, sending their oil to the Red Sea and then getting out of the region, the complications of the region. But Iran is sending a message to the GCC countries: if something is blocking our trade, you're going to face the same. This is the message.

## **#Chas**

Exactly. Exactly. At least Iran claims—I think Ansar Allah, the Houthis, are actually quite independent—but at least Iran claims that the Houthis are prepared to close the Red Sea again. That is, to close the Bab al-Mandab, in which case the exports from Yanbu and the Saudi Red Sea coast north of Jeddah will be stopped, because at the moment I think they are exporting almost 7 million barrels a day. And so, you know, their revenues are continuing to accumulate. But Iran did strike a pumping station on that east-west pipeline, and it's shown that it can take it out. So I think you're quite correct: a discussion between Prince Faisal bin Farhan and his counterpart in Iran would have had several elements to it, one of which is an Iranian warning.

But also, I think the Saudis must have made it clear they do not support the American blockade. They said that publicly. They oppose it. And I think, to go back to an earlier discussion we had some time ago, there has been a very intensive Israeli effort to portray Saudi Arabia as favoring the war when it didn't and doesn't. And Saudi Arabia has too much at stake. It wants peace. It does not want war. Of course, everybody in the Gulf, the Arab side, is very angry with Iran because they've been struck and they would like to revenge them. But they're beginning to understand that's not possible. You know, Iran is not going to go away. If they can't make peace with Iran, they will be under constant threat.

The United States has now convincingly demonstrated to them that it doesn't care very much about them, that it's not able to defend them, and certainly not willing to make the effort really to do so. So they are in a quandary. They need to reconsider their geopolitical position. Their problem is there really isn't anyone to replace the United States as a projector of power into the region. And here, let me go back quite a bit. After the Gulf War of 1990–91, the war to liberate Kuwait, the United States, unaccountably under the Clinton administration, in the interest of Israel clearly, not in the interest of the Gulf Arabs, abandoned the balancing act that we had played in the region.

Previously, we had been over the horizon. We did not have much military presence in the Gulf, and we used Iran and Iraq to balance each other. So the Gulf Arabs lined up with Iraq to ensure that Iran could not dominate them. And vice versa, Iran, of course, opposed Iraq for that same reason, wanting to maintain its independence and freedom of action. In January 1993, February 1993 perhaps, as the Clinton administration came in, Martin Indyk, the Australian-Israeli-American person responsible in the National Security Council staff for West Asia, imposed what he called dual containment.

That is, he would no longer try to balance Iran and Iraq, or the Gulf Arabs and Iran. We would try to balance them both by ourselves. That led to a huge military presence in the region, which has continued to this day. And it is that dual containment policy which contained the seeds of the disaster we now see. And it doesn't serve, it has never served, the interests of the Gulf Arabs. So I suspect that we're going to see a lot of geopolitical dynamics unfolding in the year to come in the region. And perhaps a 60-day extension of the ceasefire, as Pakistan has hinted might be the case, is the most graceful way for Donald Trump to exit the region.

And here again, as I've said before, I just say his bargaining technique is bullying. That's what he does. He tries to destroy you, or he threatens to destroy you — very mafia-style negotiating position. His habit, however, when he fails, is to declare bankruptcy and walk away. You know, so, okay, I failed. I don't have any further obligations. I won. I won. Here I am. You know, a little bit like the history in the region itself. If you think of Gamal Abdel Nasser after the Suez War, you know, he was badly defeated in that war militarily, but he said, hey, I'm still here. They threw everything they had at me, and look how strong I am, and you need me, pay respect to me. Saddam Hussein did the same thing. You know, they tried to get rid of me, but they didn't get rid of me, and here I am, and so on and so forth.

And what's more, if you want to have medicine or food, you better be nice to me, because I'm controlling all of the imports. So maybe Donald Trump is doing the same thing. Hey, you know, whatever happened, I'm still here. I'm, you know, powerful and wise and strong, and you better pay attention to me, and so on. Maybe that's what's going on. I can't think of any other explanation, frankly, because it's very clear that this war has not been kind to the United States. It has weakened us globally in many ways — militarily, politically. It's about to take a big toll economically. And it's been very unkind to Israel. But because of the blanking out of satellite coverage, we can't tell how

bad the damage in Israel is. Some Israelis apparently are going home. I don't know whether they are, because a lot of them relocated abroad during the war. I don't know what they'll find.

Maybe they'll find something like the Lebanese who are ignoring the instructions of the Israeli army and their own government and returning to southern Lebanon to check out what's left of their homes. Maybe they will find the same thing. This is not good for anybody. It was a very bad decision to get into this war. And it all was on behalf of perverse, I think, ill-considered and erroneously defined Israeli interests. And, you know, one has to hope that at some point Israel will decide that, far from conquering all its neighbors, far from subjugating them, it needs to make peace with them. Maybe it will, after 78 years, for the first time make a proposal for peaceful coexistence. If it did, I suspect Iran would gladly accept that. And so would the Arabs. But anyway, it doesn't seem to be in the cards. In fact, Israel is going in the opposite direction at the moment.