Larry Johnson & Col. Wilkerson: US, Israel & Iran’s Nuclear Standoff

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#Nima

For the third time, it seems that it was reported that two American destroyers tried to enter the Persian Gulf without Iran's permission. Then the Iranian Navy said they targeted the vessels with suicide drones and anti-ship missiles, forcing them to return to the Sea of Oman. After that, CENTCOM came out and denied what had happened. Then the Iranians published a video, saying they used these missiles, but they didn’t show the location, and we don’t know what actually happened. But is this sort of behavior going to continue in the Persian Gulf?

#Larry

Well, so that video is from about two days ago, right? Yeah. So, no, I think we're seeing, you know, there has been a strange turn of events since a week ago today, or a week ago yesterday. And I'm not claiming, you know, putting Pepe Escobar and I as the cause of this at all, but both Pepe and I received information last Thursday, and we were told about the source. The source is a senior Pakistani official in a position to have knowledge about this information. And they laid out the claim that President Raisi called Prime Minister Sharif of Pakistan following a meeting of the National Security Council in Iran. And it was basically, you tell the United States that we're not going to have any more, no more talks about anything, you know, we're cutting off talks on nuclear issues.

We're not going to even entertain or consider a framework for controlling the nukes. And we're going to do a demonstration to show you that we got one, basically. That was the message. And I did confirm subsequently that that conversation that Raisi had with Sharif took place over a non-secure line. Now, was that just a mistake, or I think that was a deliberate decision by both Iran and Pakistan, because they know that the United States would be listening in, and they'd get it. And then, in turn, Prime Minister Sharif of Pakistan ordered his foreign minister to talk and inform Marco Rubio.

And so what have we seen since that conversation, you know, I'd say allegedly took place, except Robert Barnes, who was a former Trump lawyer, and he's got White House sources, he confirmed that, in fact, that message that Bezeshkin said he gave to Sharif in Pakistan was, in fact, delivered to

Marco Rubio. So the U.S. got that message. Now, didn't that raise the question, well, are they serious? And we saw last Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and then Wednesday that U.S. provocations continued in the Persian Gulf. I think the biggest one was last Tuesday, when the attack took place — the United States hit a helicopter carrying a Hellfire, hit a running tanker, and then they hit a communication site on Qeshm Island.

And then Iran turned around and immediately fired an anti-ship missile and reportedly hit a ship connected to the U.S., and then launched attacks in Kuwait that were significant. You know, it's amazing what they do with AI, because they put out a video claiming there was an Iranian drone that hit the air terminal at the international airport. Except it shows it's broad daylight when this drone's flying in and hitting it. This all took place in the dark, for God's sake. Okay? I mean, if you're going to do the AI stuff, at least be smart about it. You know, don't be a bunch of dumbasses. And then satellite imagery has emerged showing this shelter.

Yeah, this is the one. The attack took place in the dark. But, you know, so they create this AI image to claim, oh no, this was Iran. The drone shelter at the airbase that the United States is using was obliterated. And the good old-fashioned, you know, term, it was just a hole in the ground after they got done. And then since then, crickets. Nothing. Okay, so why is the United States now standing down? So I believe—well, let me, it's not what I believe. Based upon what the source said, the Pakistanis believe that Iran is serious about this, and they conveyed that to the United States, and apparently Donald Trump and some of the people around him believe it. And the Pakistanis believe that they're going to succeed in getting a meeting in Islamabad between Trump and Bezeshkin, which, if they pull that off, I mean, it will be remarkable. Now, this isn't Pakistan doing this on its own.

It's doing it at the behest and support of China, and Russia to a lesser extent. So, you know, this is a broad effort to try—well, why would China care? China wants to get the Strait of Hormuz back open and get commerce back online because it is also hurting the Chinese economy. Not as bad as it's hurting the rest of the world, but I think China understands if the rest of the world goes into depression, then all of a sudden they're not buying goods from China. So China's got a clear interest in helping get this settled. So we're in an unusual time, but what we're seeing is a clear shift in how Donald Trump is talking about Iran, and now even carrying out military operations, even minor provocations. They've cut back on that so far in the last 24 hours. So, hey, I've laid it out. Folks, draw your own conclusion. I'm not going to tell you what to believe.

#Nima

Carl, you made your point before coming to this live. I think everybody would be happy to hear what you think about it.

#Lawrence

Well, my point was based on, as I told you before we came on the show, I listened to Alastair, Alastair Crooke, very closely, and I went over some key areas in his interview again. And I have a lot of respect for Alastair, and I think his knowledge of the region spans decades and goes deeply into both Shia and Sunni. But I think he left out one very important factor, and this feeds into what Larry just said. And the factor is, it's not necessarily the United States Iran is trying to deter, were it to do a test or were it to announce that it had a weapon. They wouldn't even have to test, in my book. It's Israel. And Israel is, as the Omani deputy or foreign minister, I think it was, said, the real problem in the region.

And we're not looking. And Alastair finally did come around to this — that we're looking at not just the Iranians, but we're looking at their so-called proxies. And I don't buy that for a minute. I think Alastair is right about that. The Houthis are the Houthis. Yeah, if they can get a little support here or a little support there, they will. But they're the Houthis. They're not Iran's proxies as we depict them. We're forgetting about Palestine, a Palestinian state. Even the Saudis have said that. We're forgetting about what Israel is doing in four distinctly different wars — five or six if you want to count the others like Syria.

And we're forgetting about what Israel presents as a threat, which he went over very, very profoundly in terms of Lebanon, and talked about Hassan Nasrallah and others and what has been happening there, what is going on right now — the political dilemma that Netanyahu is in, both personally, meaning he's going to jail if he loses this election, and into ignominy, which isn't his idea of how he wants to finish up his life and his term. And the rock and the hard place that he's caught between, with the people in Israel who are campaigning against him and are going to intensify that based on his lack of doing things that are assuring Israel's security, whereas they will. And so he's caught. He's got to keep up in Lebanon. He's got to do what he's doing in Lebanon. He's got to increase what he's doing in Lebanon.

He's got to answer the IDF's questions about what are we doing here and show them that, you know, go ahead, do what you need to do to defeat this enemy if you can. All of that is warp and woof of what I'm trying to say about Ted Postol, for example, and his prediction that the Iranians might build one themselves, let alone get one from someone else. If you look at all of that and you say, do they really have the provocation? Do they really have the strategic rationale to get a nuclear weapon and to demonstrate that they have a nuclear weapon? It's not the United States they're trying to deter. They've deterred us. They have deterred us quite readily. It's Israel.

And as long as Israel is there... I think just as there was with Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, and all the Kims with regard to South Korea, their real problem wasn't South Korea. Their real problem was the United States. I mean, they actually thought, and intelligence reveals they thought, they could defeat South Korea. I'm not sure that was true, but they thought they could. But the United States, they didn't think they could. You know, with U.S. power coming onto the peninsula, they didn't think

they could. So that was what that was for. And the idea that China and Russia wouldn't go along with it — absolutely. China and Russia fought tooth and nail in the six-party talks and elsewhere trying to keep North Korea from getting a nuclear weapon. They didn't want them to have one.

China was very explicit about it. And we even got some good intelligence that said, well, one of the reasons is because if the Korean Peninsula is unified, they don't want that unified Korean Peninsula to be a nuclear power, a nuclear weapons power. But they went along with it, and they're going along with it now because they didn't have a choice. All to say that it's a little more complicated, I think, about Iran looking for a nuclear weapon. And were I just looking at it from a military professional point of view, I'd say get a weapon. Get deterrence against the principal enemy in your area, against the problem in the area, against the reason there will be no Palestinian state, against the reason there will be turmoil from now until kingdom come. Israel.

#Larry

Yeah, and let me just, you know, let me suggest that I can conceive how Mojtaba Khamenei would square the circle on going against what would appear to be a rejection of his father's fatwa. So, you know, as we've discussed in previous conversations, the heart of this from the Shia perspective is one of the problems with a nuclear weapon is it has the potential to kill noncombatants in a massive way, and that killing noncombatants is haram, it's a sin. But if you say, look, we're now at an existential point, that our ability to protect and defend the people of Iran, for starters, is at risk.

And the only way to perhaps fully deter the threat presented by Israel is to have a weapon that could be used against Israeli military facilities. So in other words, you say, okay, we're going to do this, but it's only going to be used against military targets. It's not going to be used against civilian targets. And that's one way, I think, that possibly how Mojtaba went about the decision-making, saying, okay, we're now going to do this. But it was in the aftermath of the murder of his father, mother, wife, and child. So, you know, it's not an unnatural reaction to say, okay, we now have to do something that was previously considered wrong, but we're going to try to do it in the right way because we have to protect ourselves.

#Nima

Yeah.

#Lawrence

And I'd reinforce that, Nima, with just a simple statement that Kim Jong-un has not shot anybody with his nuclear weapons. Yeah. It's a deterrent, and he knows it's a deterrent. Now, I will admit Israel is a volatile character in this whole thing. You don't know what they're going to do. And it's not quite like South Korea and the United States with South Korea. But it is still a deterrent. I take the point that Alistair was making, too, about counterproliferation being an incentive to proliferation.

I take that well because we talked about that a lot in the State Department. And to a certain extent, he's right. It is an incentive. And what Kim did is an incentive to other states if they have the wherewithal politically and money. We found the biggest objection by a number of states that were on our list for possible nuclear weapons candidates was money.

It's so damned expensive. And so that was a deterrent for several of them. They didn't want to spend all that hard-earned cash, you know. They weren't the richest countries in the world anyway, on a nuclear program because it was so damn expensive. But you get away from that if you start doing things like we're doing in the world now, which is to say, okay, it's all over. Everybody's living in a Hobbesian world. Oh, by the way, the Empire will eat you anytime it can. Then you put a new incentive on it. And the Non-Proliferation Treaty actually becomes, I think, defunct, many will argue right now. In fact, I'm reading articles all the time now in kind of the edges of the nuclear discussion about how the NPT is dead. Absolutely dead. It doesn't mean anything to anyone anymore.

#Nima

NPT is part of, Larry, this whole process of, you know, sending experts to Iran to see the nuclear facilities and to verify everything. This was a huge security problem for Iran for such a long time. They were recognizing the scientists.

#Lawrence

We made it that way. I mean, we put agents on the team. We got the director to be our person. When he wasn't our person, we agitated to get him removed and put another one in there. I mean, it's clear the IAEA was acting on behalf of the empire most of the time. I'm not saying all the time. I'm not saying all the people were corrupt, but I am saying key ones were, and we made sure they were so that the decision would always be positive for us.

#Nima

Yeah. Larry, the problem for Donald Trump is not right now what's going on in the Persian Gulf, in my opinion, it's what's going on between Israel and Lebanon. That's why, you know, everything is happening in that region. That's why Iran reacted to what Israel wanted to do in Dahia, in the southern part of Beirut. This is so important. This is the first time you see Iran coming out and saying to Israel, if you attack Lebanon, we're going to do the same to the northern part of Israel. This is huge, in my opinion, from the Iranian point of view. And how is that going to change? How is that going to come into the calculation, into the equation of Washington?

#Larry

Well, clearly it has inspired Donald Trump to pick up the phone and have a conversation, I guess we'll call it, with Bibi Netanyahu. And, you know, a lot of people dismissed the Axios report,

understandably, because the author of it has a track record of being a shill and mouthpiece for propaganda. But if it was propaganda, Trump didn’t leave him hanging. He kept saying, yeah, I had a tough conversation with Bibi, you know, so he basically admitted it. And you're correct, Nima, that, you know, since Iran was created, you know, it formed itself as an Islamic Republic 47 years ago. And during the last, you know, we've had, you know, it came into being after the whole civil war in Lebanon started.

The civil war in Lebanon started in 1975. So at no time in that 47-year history until now did Iran directly speak up and say, okay, if you don't stop attacking, we're going to attack you. And so that's a game changer, I think, because it highlights the fact that Iran feels quite comfortable and confident in its ability to deliver on its threat. And while Israel may have been reluctant to believe it, they still finally listened to Trump. Whether they did it willingly or not, I don't know. But all we know is that the threats that were being made, particularly by these madmen, these monsters, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, about leveling, flattening Dahia, an entire suburb of Beirut.

They've been quiet. And again, this piece of information that Pepe and I dropped, you know, was it intended for manipulation? No, I think there is a lot going on behind the scenes now that is out of the ordinary. And as a result, we're starting to see, you know, there is at least a cessation of the bombing attacks on Beirut. I mean, that's stopped so far, you know, knock on wood. But this agreement that Washington put out the other day, I mean, this is just another example of a stupid gesture. You know, that's happened before over the last, you know, 50-odd years that this war has been, 51 years that this civil war in Lebanon has been underway. If you want an end to it, you got to sit Hezbollah at the table too. They got to be part of that negotiation. And if they're not part of that negotiation, you don't have a deal. And so the Trump administration can delude themselves and, oh, yeah, we've got the Lebanese army that's going to force Hezbollah out. Good luck with that. Forty percent of their army is Shia, okay? They've got brothers and cousins and fathers and uncles that are Hezbollah fighters. Ain't going to happen. So this is, let's call it, it's sort of a step in the right direction, but until Hezbollah is fully engaged in the process, you know, Hezbollah is going to continue beating the hell out of the Israelis.

#Lawrence

There's another thing that Alistair talked about that I agree with 100% — that Hassan Nasrallah was very respected in Iran. And if you want to talk about influence, his influence on Iran was probably more powerful than their influence on him. And what did Israel do with him? Probably the most astute politician in Beirut — killed him.

#Larry

Well, yeah, and on that point, some have commented, well, did Trump talk to Hezbollah? Hezbollah is not going to talk to Donald Trump, at least directly. There will only be indirect communication because they learned their lesson. What the United States and Israel did in the death of Nasrallah

was, the United States was talking to Nasrallah about getting him involved, helping with the ceasefire, and that meeting that took place where he was killed was entirely in response to a U.S. request. The United States used the communications with him to geolocate him so he could be killed. That's what happened. And Hezbollah has figured that out. So they go, you know, we're not stupid. You know, you got us once, but we're not going to do that again. So this is, you know, I think we're in a new phase where the United States is discovering the limits of its power.

#Nima

Colonel, what is the reality between Israel and Lebanon in terms of casualties, in terms of the weapons or air defense systems that are getting hit by drones? It's something, as you've seen, you've watched Alistair Crook mention, it's something like 8 to 10 casualties every day.

#Lawrence

I think he's right. And I think basically Netanyahu is doing everything he can to hide that from the Israeli people. The casualties, both WIA and KIA, are quite high. In fact, I think they're probably as high as any in this conflagration of wars that Israel is involved in right now. And it doesn't look like there's going to be any surcease there, because if they keep moving north, if they go to the Litani River, for example, if they go back to attacking Beirut again, which I think is inevitable... then they're just going to grow.

So that's pressure on Netanyahu too from the forces on the ground, because they want to do certain things to limit that, to cut them a little bit, and he's not going to let them do it in the way they want to do it, because he's trying to walk both dogs at the same time—convince Trump that he's not doing what he's doing, and at the same time doing what he's doing. This is a really difficult place for him to be. And I think what's happening politically, of course, as you know, in Israel, is his opponents are saying he's not doing enough and even saying that he is kowtowing to the American president.

#Larry

Yeah.

#Lawrence

And they wouldn't if they were elected. You know, that's the insinuation anyway. He's really between a rock and a hard place right now—damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. And he'll pick the one that damns him the least, both personally and politically, I think. And that's going to be going after Hezbollah full bore. Yeah.

#Nima

Larry, did you see the terms of the agreement between the Lebanese government and Israel? It was unbelievable what was mentioned in that agreement. Hezbollah is not going to attack Israel in the southern part of the Litani River, south of the Litani River. Hezbollah is the enemy of the state of Lebanon.

#Larry

I didn't read the whole thing, but when I heard sort of the briefing on those parts, I just laughed, because it's just ridiculous that they think they can ignore Hezbollah. And as I pointed out earlier, 40% of the Lebanese army that's supposedly going to enforce this is Shia, and they've got too many family ties into Hezbollah. And do you think it's just a coincidence? Am I suggesting that Hezbollah may have deliberately infiltrated the Lebanese army? You bet your ass, okay? These people are not fools. They're survivors, and they understand that they're up against a terrible enemy. So what... And that's why I went back and said that until they get Hezbollah at the table, they're not going to have an agreement.

I particularly laughed at the force Hezbollah to abandon territory south of the Litani River and go north. Yeah, that'll happen. So actually, it goes back to Col. Wilkerson's point. Israel is overstretched. Put it in the context of taking the population of New York City and putting that population in New Jersey, for Americans anyway. You know, you live in Brazil, you don't know what I'm talking about. But that's basically the size of Israel. Now, imagine how the city of New York would react to news that in the last six months, we've had 200 of our police officers killed. Good Lord. I mean, that would be considered an unbelievable number.

I mean, it would be shocking. And yet, that's what Israel's experiencing. And we're not even talking about the number of wounded — that's far, far larger. And then add to that that they're getting post-traumatic stress syndrome treatment, the growing number of suicides among Israeli reservists. So, no, look, this is an ugly, ugly situation for Israel. And, you know, they've painted themselves into a corner, and there's not an easy escape route or one readily identifiable. And yet the extremists that surround Netanyahu — the Ben-Gvirs, the Smotriches — they're going to double down. They are not actually stepping back and rationally evaluating the situation.

#Lawrence

Now, Alistair's point about it being the kind of army that it is — basically the people mobilized, reservists mobilized — and the strategy that's now being pursued being absolutely counterproductive, because you've got a, call it a citizen army if you will, basically. And you've got this strategy that is calling on them to act like a huge professional army going out and fighting to the death four or five countries at the same time. Yeah. That's insane. Yeah.