

Israel and Iran: Trump's Step Beyond the 'Art of the Deal' Changes Everything

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Introduction by Michael Brenner, May 17, 2018

The Middle East is in turmoil – with mortal risks at every point of the compass. While each crisis is presented in its own discrete terms in the mainstream media, we blind ourselves to two compelling realities: these conflicts are inter-twined; and the United States bears the main responsibility for this descent into mayhem and chaos. The chances of major conflagration mount even as American national aims and purposes are kept obscure. An unhinged nation is hurtling toward a disaster of choice.

Alastair Crooke is one of the few who have perceived the depth of our folly and the full import of what is occurring. He is a former British diplomat, founder and director of the Beirut-based Conflicts Forum, and has a sterling record of integrity as well as insight into Middle Eastern affairs.

Nahum Barnea writing in Yedioth Ahronoth sets out, plainly enough, the gamble underway between Israel and Iran (and to which Trump is willing accessory): In the wake of the US exit from JCPOA, Trump will threaten a rain of 'fire and fury' onto Tehran, should the latter attack Israel directly, whilst Putin is expected to restrain Iran from attacking Israel, using Syrian territory – thus leaving Netanyahu free to set new rules of the game by which the Israel may attack and destroy Iranian forces anywhere in Syria (and not just in the border area, as earlier agreed) when it wishes, without fear of retaliation.

Barnea calls this a this 'a triple gamble': "Netanyahu is counting on Khamenei's caution, on Trump's credibility, and on Putin's generosity, three character traits that they have never been known to possess before today... The question is what will happen, if instead of breaking – the ayatollahs choose war, or more likely, the region devolves into war as a result of a hasty, uncalculated course of action by one of the players. Will Trump be willing, in order to defend Israel and Saudi Arabia, to open a new front in the Middle East? If he does, that will contrary to everything that he promised the voters during the election campaign". Barnea's colleague, Ben Caspit, however, asserts that this issue – US military support – is already assured:

"The United States [has] promised Israel full and total support on all fronts... if a regional war does break out, the United States will immediately make its

position clear, express support for Israel, and send Moscow the right signals. This is to ensure that Russian President Vladimir Putin stays out of the conflict, and does not try to intervene, whether directly or indirectly, on behalf of his allies, Iran and Syria. Upon returning from Washington, (Israeli Defence Minister) Liberman informed the prime minister that he had received a “green light” in security matters.”

Caspi candidly characterises the relationship, post JCPOA, between Bibi and Trump, thus: “There is only one thing that isn’t clear,” one of the people closest to Netanyahu told Al-Monitor, speaking on the condition of anonymity:

“That is, who works for whom? Does Netanyahu work for Trump, or is President Trump at the service of Netanyahu...From the outside, at least, upon close inspection, it looks like the two men are perfectly in sync. From the inside, this seems even more so: This kind of cooperation between the two leaders and their two offices — the Oval Office in the White House and the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem — sometimes makes it seem as if they are actually just one single, large office”, a senior Israeli Defence official told Caspi.

“For now, the gamble is paying off: The Iranians, have not (so far) responded. Now they have another good reason to display restraint: the battle for public opinion in Europe”, Barnea adds. “Trump could have declared a US withdrawal and made do with that. But under the influence of Netanyahu and of his new team, he chose to go one step further. The economic sanctions on Iran will be much tighter, beyond what they were, before the nuclear agreement was signed. ‘Hit them in their pockets’, Netanyahu advised Trump: if you hit them in their pockets, they will choke; and when they choke they will throw out the ayatollahs. As of last night [Trump’s exit from JCPOA], Trump had warmly adopted this approach.”

This then – from the horse’s mouth – is the Israeli view: Iran will be hit everywhere in Syria, (and much less plausibly) isolated diplomatically, and its economy shredded. The Iranian ‘regime’ is ‘obbling’; its economy is “in a death spiral” and the Iranian rial is in freefall – if we are to believe the mainstream Israeli and American ‘hawk’ narrative.

Incidentally, the escalation and exchange of missile fire across the Israeli border on Wednesday and Thursday morning, was not Iranian in origin (there are no IRGC near the Golan). Nor was the exchange initiated by Iran, but rather by Israel, striking Syrian targets as it has done regularly over recent weeks. On this occasion, however, Israel intended to cast Iran as ‘the accused’ (the pre-announced opening of the shelters in occupied Golan by Israel was something of a ‘give-away’ to a coming false flag event), to further the pressures on Tehran.

In fact, that it was Damascus that broke convention by firing twenty missiles into occupied Golan, without taking into consideration Russian requests for restraint, is of greater import, than were it the Iranians that had fired the missiles. This missile exchange represented the first occasion, in decades, that Syria has fired missiles at Israeli military targets inside the Golan.

This represents the first ‘unintended consequence’ to Trump’s announcement: Israeli coat-tailing aimed at Iran, paradoxically, has forced the Syrian government to put the occupied Golan Heights into play, as the next battlefield.

“If Israel continues its attacks, Syria will think of sending its missiles or rockets way beyond the Golan Heights – to reach Israeli territory”, regional war commentator, Elijah Magnier forecasts.

But, contrary to the mainstream presentation, Trump’s ‘war’ on Iran has a much wider geo-political ramification than just a deepening of Iran-Israeli tensions. We will witness further ‘unintended consequences’ for the US, in the weeks ahead.

The wider significance to the above Israeli reading of the ‘Trump – Netanyahu understandings’ (if accurate – and probably, it is), is that it represents a strategic change: This is no longer Art of the Deal belligerence, as foreplay to a coupling – and ultimately to a negotiated settlement.

Barnea and other Israeli commentators may be correct: Netanyahu (and his team of hawks) has taken Trump, one step further. It has become the Art of ‘Regime Change’; a war of attrition against Iran – a medieval siege – by any other name.

Not only Iran, but North Korea, Russia and China will need to pay close attention. It seems that Kim Jong Un’s volunteering to talk de-nuclearisation with Trump has electrified, and seemingly legitimised, Trump’s enthusiasm for Art of the Deal style, ‘fire and fury’, threats-and-make up, tactics. Netanyahu however, seemingly has succeeded in waving the succulent scent of regime change before Trump’s nose, and lured him, to follow it on Bibi’s heels, hoping for a big ‘win’. Promising ‘fire and fury’, Trump seems convinced, is a ‘sure thing’ to achieving capitulation by the other party.

The problem is that Trump may find that he is building on sand. Was it Trump’s tough stance that brought Jong Un to the table? Or, perhaps contrarily, might Jong Un see a meeting with Trump precisely as the necessary and required price that he has to pay in order to get China ‘have his back’, as it were – in the event that a ‘de-nuclearisation for de-Americanisation’ of the region deal, just doesn’t work – and to develop his re-unification diplomacy with a South which now – for the first time – given its mandate to unification – irrespective of American wishes?

Is Trump even aware of this possibility? China is the Goliath in Korea’s back yard. It is its main – almost only trading partner – and it effectively controls the settings on the North Korea sanctions vice. And China has been tightening that vice, turn by turn. China has long, and insistently, advocated talks between Jong Un and Washington. Xi wants de-nuclearisation of the neighbourhood, and reconciliation with the South. Kim is complying with his powerful neighbour’s wishes; but, in turn, no doubt has been asking China to ‘have his back’ if it all goes wrong.

Trump’s ‘step beyond’ Art of the Deal strategies, to regime change (in Iran) does not bode well for China’s North Korea strategy. If Trump expects capitulation from Jong Un – and doesn’t get it, then China will have little option but to get involved in order to deter Trump from any ‘bloody-nose’ exercise, or from attempted regime change. China does not want Jong Un’s capitulation or removal — It has no desire to have an US proxy – or its missiles – on its border.

Trump’s rapture with his Art of the Deal – and newly, Regime Change approach – makes it more likely that Trump will mis-read Jong Un’s readiness to ‘kneel’ – with the ‘unintended consequence’ of finding that China has Jong Un’s ‘back’, and not Trump’s. The

consequences may be profound.

In a similar vein, Israel has been predicting the overthrow of Iranian state by its people for decades (just as Israeli officials have been announcing Hizbullah's weakness, and disavowal by the Lebanese people, with a constant regularity – at least until this week's Lebanese elections).

Iran's economy has been somewhat flaccid, it is fair to say; but it is not – at all – as weak (or in a 'death spiral') as the mainstream has it. Sure: Young people lack jobs (but that is the same across much of Europe). And 2018 is not 2012. Iran will not be either so financially or politically isolated in the wake of Trump's JCPOA edict as before – in fact the Israeli-American initiative likely will bind Iran's alliance with China and Russia, tighter. Iran will turn East, of course.

For, Russia, America's message could not be plainer: The US and Israel want to keep Syria as an open wound, into which Israel can stick its finger at any time – primarily in order to deny President Putin any foreign policy 'achievement', but also just to keep Damascus 'weak'. And Trump wants either the full capitulation of the Iranian government, or its overthrow.

With JCPOA exit, and the handing of Jerusalem to Israel, Putin will be contemplating a de-stabilised, conflicted and fragile, Middle East – just what China and Russia did not want to see. The paths of Syria, Iran and Russia are now deeply interwoven. They may have their differences, but Syria was the reason why they fight together, as comrades-in-arms, and why, in the wider context, they behave jointly as partners in a military and strategic alliance with China.

These three states are in a de facto alliance whose strategic domain, properly understood, is the entire Middle East, whether in terms of China's Road and Corridor initiative, or Russia's energy 'heartland' matching structure. Their interest is in a stable region, not a de-stabilised one. Trump's two moves (JCPOA and Jerusalem) are fragmentation, explosive grenades tossed into the matrix of Chinese and Russian strategic interests.

Trump's 'step beyond': his Art of exiting the deal in favour of regime change however, poses a different order of threat to Moscow. Of course, Putin is aware that the American 'deep state' wants its Atlanticist 'fifth column', economic power-base in Russia, to remove Putin from power – and for Russia to be brought to embrace the American-led global order.

Perhaps Putin had thought that somehow Trump would overcome the internal US 'civil war', to find his way towards détente. But the series of signals is unmistakeable: the initial US Defence Statements moved from seeing Russia as a 'competitor'; then to 'revisionist power'; then to number 'one' threat (above terrorism); then, to an much elevated 'threat' — demanding the up-grading of US missile systems, the replacement of its nuclear submarine fleet and the re-working of its nuclear arsenal; then to a doctrine of conditions-based use of nuclear weapons – and now, to the 'step beyond': regime change.

Putin understandably wants to avoid military conflict with the US, if at all possible, but, at the same time, he must know that if he does not draw Russia's line in the sand for America (and Netanyahu), somewhere, soon, he will be perceived as being weak by the US hawks, who will just push him harder. Putin has been trying to mediate between Israel and Iran, but that prospect has been damaged by Pompeo and Trump's anti-Iranian, Redemptionist

passion. And Putin, too, must prepare for the worse with the US – and yet not prematurely damage the conditions for his Partner, Xi Jinping’s elaborate ongoing sparring match with Washington, over trade and tariffs and North Korea.

The greatest ‘unexpected consequence’ will be that Putin and Xi determine that Trump’s ‘step beyond’ precisely is the time to draw the ‘line in the sand’ – and resolve to enforce it. If this happens, everything changes. Does Trump understand this?

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