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No Attack on Iran, Yet

Donald Trump is in enough trouble, legally and politically, to need a war – or so one would think. Sanctions just don't cut it.

He has a serviceable enemy at hand too, Iran.

American elites have long had it in for the Islamic Republic. They have many reasons, but high on the list is a point of honor: years after it happened, they still want payback for “the hostage crisis,” the government supported humiliation that revolutionary Iranian students inflicted upon the American Empire in the final 444 days of the Carter administration. Nearly everything disappears down the memory hole in “the United States of Amnesia” – except affronts to American authority, which are never forgotten.

The broader American public doesn't care much for Iran either; the idea that the country is full of terrorists and led by demonic Ayatollahs is deeply entrenched.

There is an Iranian-American lobby, led by people too articulate and thoughtful to make much difference in a political culture dominated by mind-numbing cable networks and Twitter. If it had more rich backers, it might nevertheless have some influence. As it is, its cultural and political impact is slight, and its effect on elections is nil.

Therefore, were Trump to start a war against Iran, or to let Israel go at their “existential threat” du jour, there would be plenty of voters covering his back and many egging him on.

The question therefore arises: with the majority of Americans despising him, with the law closing in on him, and with his base too pathetic to do much more than stoke his ego at vile campaign-style rallies, why not go for it?

The obvious answer is that in addition to the enormous devastation and death that a war with Iran would cause – it would make the Bush-Cheney Iraq War seem almost anodyne in comparison — an Iran War now would create havoc in world energy markets. Iranian oil still counts for something in the world, and Iran could easily put the Strait of Hormuz, the chokepoint through which much of the world’s oil passes, out of commission.

That is the last thing that a world economy, already teetering on the brink of contraction and already having to contend with the beginning stages of Trump-induced trade wars, needs.

To be sure, Trump knows little and cares less about geography or the global economic order and he has no time for obvious answers; on this as on everything else, it is an axiom of his that the Donald knows best.

And so, if the Donald wants war, then, unless his minions put up too much of a fuss, war it shall be. On this, it seems that his minions are still on board.

The mystery is all the greater inasmuch as, this past spring, Trump assembled a War Cabinet, going so far as to make John Bolton, the vilest and most bellicose neocon in the DC establishment, his National Security Advisor. This was on top of a marginally less noxious conglomeration of Islamophobes and neocon Israel Firsters, already more than eager to do Iran harm.

Russophobia is a “bipartisan” affliction, but Islamophobia, though common enough in Democratic circles, is more of a Republican thing. Should Trump get a hankering to act out against Iran, there is no doubt that the House and Senate, both under Republican control, would be more than happy to go along.

What, then, is holding him back?

Whether or not Russia has something on him, Trump and Putin do seem joined together by some sort of “elective affinity.” On the off chance that someone might not see it, the liberal commentariat has taken to driving the point home 24/7.

They are relentless on this, even as Trump’s administration, stupidly and gratuitously, levels sanctions on Russia. At MSNBC, this is just evidence of Trump’s incompetence: he goes one way, his administration another. Perhaps so. Still, the idea that Trump lives and breathes to make Putin happy persists.

Corporate media make less of it, but it is plain as can be that Trump’s fondness for generals and admirals, the more “mad doggish” the better, is of equal or greater consequence.

The reasons why remain buried deep in the recesses of his unconscious mind. Like many other troubled boys with rich parents back in the fifties and sixties, young Donald was packed off to a military school. Maybe that has something to do with it. Whatever the explanation, septuagenarian Donnie does listen to men with medals.

Thank God for that – because, no matter how mad doggish they may be, they must at least understand how disastrous a war with Iran would be. As creatures of a world in which being in touch with reality counts for something, they could hardly buy into Trump’s delusions.

Therefore, we owe them a lot. This is painful to admit; keeping the military from calling the shots is normally a good thing in a country that purports to be a liberal democracy. But Trump has turned the world upside down and topsy-turvy. Too bad, therefore, that the Masters of War he likes and respects are not really in charge, that they are moderating influences at best.

The real “decider,” as Bush 43, now only the second worst president in modern American history, called himself, is Trump’s unhinged mind, the blooming, buzzing confusion lodged in the murky recesses of the presidential skull.

There is ample incoherence there and not much that makes sense. But Trump’s mind is more than adequate for one thing: flimflaming gullible audiences. At that, he is a past master.

Decades of Clintonism – of neoliberal austerity, deindustrialization, malign neglect of the labor movement, subservience to corporate and financial interests, and self-righteous but toothless goody-goodyism — paved the way for Trump’s victory. Even so, had he been running against a more able candidate than “crooked Hillary” – even another Clintonite like say, hapless Joe Biden — he almost certainly would not be president now.

Neither would he have won the 2016 election were he less good at sizing up and working a crowd.

But even the best conmen have to offer, or seem to offer, what their marks want. Typically, that would be money. For mountebanks like Trump, the greedy are easy prey.

No doubt, some Trump voters, the rich ones especially, were guilty of nothing more odious than old-fashioned avarice. Less well off Trump voters may have been deluded into thinking that Trump would serve as their de facto tribune; that he would protect them from the “elites,” and that, with him in the White House, happy days would soon be here again.

That some of them still think that way two years later — after the tax scam Trump perpetrated for the benefit of the rich and heinous, and now with a devastating trade war of

his contrivance looming – demonstrates more than just their willful blindness and the public relations acumen of rightwing media. It also attests to the intensity of their will to believe.

And it shows that greed, though often sufficient, is not necessary for perpetrating a good con.

The cult-like attachment of Trump supporters to their man, surely one of the sleaziest creatures ever to ooze out of what he calls the “swamp,” is motivated not so much by greed or even desperation as by a desire to tell the ruling class and its flunkies in both duopoly parties, the mainstream media, and other beneficiaries, real or imagined, of the world order the Clintons and their co-thinkers fashioned to go do to themselves what Trump does to strippers and Playboy models.

More power to them for that; that they would want to send that message is understandable, justifiable, even laudable. If only they had been able to settle on a smarter, less self-destructive, more edifying means to that end.

For not doing that, they can hardly be blamed. It would be different if there were a sizeable and authentic opposition party to which they could turn. Unfortunately, we don’t currently have anything like that; what we have instead is the Democratic Party.

JFK called on Americans “to pay any price, bear any burden...” His words resonated, but the sentiment faded fast – thanks, in part, to the military assault on Vietnam that he launched.

Would the dwindling band of Trump supporters be any more steadfast were Trump to involve America in a war, the sheer stupidity of which would register in their minds not in years (or, as it turned out in Kennedy’s case, while another president was in office), but, more likely, in weeks or even days.

Trump probably cannot find the Straits of Hormuz on a map and his understanding of the world economy is minimal, but he does know enough to realize that he shouldn’t launch a war that would turn unpopular quickly, and that he should steer clear of anything that would precipitate an economic disaster.

Even if he could, as he said, get away with, or maybe even benefit from, shooting someone on Fifth Avenue, getting the kinds of people who now support him, people whose sons and daughters become economic conscripts for the benefit of the military-industrial complex, bogged down in Iran, in what would soon turn into the mother of all quagmires, might be a step too far.

War with Serbia over Kosovo helped Bill Clinton deal with his impeachment problems back in the Monica Lewinsky days. But tails no longer wag dogs in quite the way they used to; that was all so twentieth century. Among the many problems and several benefits brought on by social media, it is now a lot harder than it used to be to deflect attention away from obvious political ruses.

And so, for now, there is no hot war raging against Iran, and even proxy wars against Iran's allies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq have remained more or less low grade. So long as sane heads prevail, this is not going to change.

Trump, however, is the arch-foe of sane heads. He lacks impulse control and is incapable of thinking strategically for more than a few minutes at a time.

Remarkably, there are people who still think that he somehow knows what he is doing, and that his displays of ignorance, incompetence, and stupidity are a feint. They could hardly be more wrong, but, for Americans, such is the power of the idea that wealth and intelligence go together, and such is the lingering prestige that still attaches to the office Trump degrades, that, despite its obvious untenability, the idea persists.

That fact is that he is in way over his head, and, as the law closes in on him and his family, that he feels increasingly besieged. In the circumstances, he could well look to a war with Iran for a way out, even as his every conman instinct tells him otherwise.

The danger is all the greater with foreign "meddlers" urging him on.

There is Israel, first of all. As much as he and Putin have a good thing going, Trump loves Benjamin Netanyahu more.

Netanyahu is arguably more noxious than Putin, and certainly more heedless of international law. It is mainly he and his co-thinkers who have taken it upon themselves to get Americans to think of Iran as the fountainhead of Islamist terrorism — in the hope of getting a war going between the United States and the Islamic Republic.

The Trump-Netanyahu bromance is a match made in heaven (or would that be hell?).

Trump's real estate cronies couldn't be happier, and neither could some of his new best friends — Sheldon Adelson, for example, and others of his ilk. Better still, having slept in young Jared's bed at his felonious father's house in New Jersey, the Bibster is practically family. Best of all, there is nothing in his accent that could give an America Firster pause; it is straight out of the Philadelphia 'burbs.

Netanyahu has the vaunted Israel lobby, a mélange of officially "domestic" interest groups that take their marching orders from the Israeli government, at his disposal. It is more

likely than not that, if challenged, that dreaded lobby would turn out to be a Paper Tiger, but politicians who live in mortal fear of its power will be the last to know.

Putin has nothing even remotely comparable.

But why would the Netanyahu government want to use its stranglehold over the American political class to cause harm to Iran?

Contrary to what is widely supposed, the answer has almost nothing to do with the animosity Iran's political and religious leaders show towards the self-described "nation state of the Jewish people."

Since the Shah was overthrown, the theocrats and politicians who speak for Iran have been unstintingly anti-Zionist in their public pronouncements. In practice, however, relations between Iran and Israel have been more congenial.

This was certainly the case during the Reagan (Iran-Contra) years, when Iranian anti-Israeli rhetoric was most extreme. At the risk of demeaning the word "gentlemen" (since there were, and still are, none on either side), it was as if there had been a "gentlemen's agreement" to talk up a storm and then do next to nothing about it.

Before the Iranian Revolution, Palestinians were Israel's main enemy; it was, after all, their land that Zionists took over. Naturally, Zionists feared that they would want to fight back.

Or, as with other European colonial ventures, the enemy was Arabs generally. Muslims as such generally got off more easily, Persians (Iranians) especially.

This had been the case since Biblical times. Of all the great powers with which Jews in antiquity interacted, Persia was the one they disliked least. This cultural memory has survived, not too far beneath the surface, ever since.

Adherents to all the world's great religions are of one mind on one thing: that everyone other than their own co-religionists can go to hell. But degrees of animosity vary, and, as with everything else, contingent circumstances and selective forgetfulness soften or intensify feelings of hostility.

For most of the past millennium and a half, relations between Jews and Muslims were a lot better than between Jews and Christians. Now the opposite is true.

For improvements in Jewish-Christian relations, thank mainly the rise of liberalism in early modern Europe.

Thank also the surge of interest in the Hebrew Bible set off by the Protestant Reformation, especially in Great Britain and North America.

But for that, theologies that see the Zionist project as a stage in the fulfillment of so-called “End Time,” prophecies would never have taken hold or even been conceived, Christian Zionism would be unthinkable, and Israel’s hold over the American political class would therefore be much diminished.

Christian Zionism is based on the conviction that as the End Time approaches, Jews will either convert or be consigned to Hell for all eternity. It combines anti-Judaism, a theological position, with anti-Semitism, an ethno-racialist doctrine. One would think that self-respecting Zionists would have no time for such demeaning nonsense. But self-respect pales in the face of “reasons of state.” The cynicism of the Zionist establishment is so extreme as to be almost stupefying.

Ultimately, though, Realpolitik is not all that is going on. There is something more like religious fervor involved as well.

For many Jews in Israel and around the world, Zionism long ago superseded the Jewish religion. Zionism was once mainly a secular movement, but that was a long time ago. There are still many secular Zionists, of course, but, for the majority of Jewish Zionists, Judaism has become incorporated back into the Zionist worldview – in the service of something that never existed before, Jewish nationalism.

Thus the state of an imagined community has become what the prophets railed against, an idol. As the prophets might say, it has taken the place of God.

The usual raw materials out of which nations are forged – a common language, a common territory, common descent – don’t exactly apply in this case. Judaism, the Jewish religion in its various forms, is the only truly Jewish thing that all Jews share.

Therefore, even secular Zionists could never forsake the Jewish religion entirely. They hijacked it instead, deploying its symbols and cultural forms for their own nation-building purposes.

Because they did, a certain level of sympathy and respect for Persia and all things Persian was built into the Zionist outlook from Day One.

If there were a Jewish conception of hell similar, say, to Dante’s account of Christianity’s, it would of course be filled with the souls of non-chosen peoples from all over the world, along with the souls of Jews gone wrong. I would venture, though, that Persians, unlike Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and other important players in the history of the Jewish people — would occupy its higher regions.

In short, the vilification of Iran goes against the grain; it therefore requires effort to generate and sustain. Netanyahu could care less. However much he may feign fidelity to

traditional pieties, he, and his co-thinkers, are more interested in “existential threats” than in observances and beliefs.

This makes perfect sense. Dietary laws, religious holidays, and Sabbath prohibitions are useless for keeping a fractious citizenry united, and “diaspora” Jews on board. Real or imagined threats to the existence of the Jewish state are something else altogether.

Iran is a big country with a large, well-trained army, and, though still constrained by the nuclear deal Barack Obama helped negotiate, it is the only serious potential challenger to Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly. It therefore makes a fine existential threat – far and away better than anything else nearby and available.

Israel is not the only “meddling” foreign country trying to lead the United States into a war with Iran, and neither is it the most odious. That title goes to Saudi Arabia.

Corporate media have lately been giving the Saudi leader-in-waiting, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, MBS, good press. Evidently, in their minds, Saudi capitalism is friendly, unlike Russian capitalism, which somehow is not.

They therefore cut MBS a lot of slack. It doesn’t hurt his standing with them that he is a buddy of Jared Kushner’s or that he is said to be a modernizer, with less retrograde views on women than his father and uncles and most of his fellow princes. This is enough to make him seem almost like a class brother to our media moguls and their pundits.

Thus he gets away with things that even Netanyahu would never dare contemplate – like threatening Canada with a 9/11 style attack for supporting human rights, and creating a severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen by conducting a brutal, genocidal war there. How pathetic is that! The Saudis in Yemen actually make the butchers of unarmed demonstrators in Gaza – the Israeli army, the self-declared “most moral army in the world” – look good. But corporate media seldom even mention Saudi war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against the peace in Yemen or anywhere else.

The Saudi “regime” (“regime” is the word our media use to designate governments not in favor) is the worst of the worst in the most retrograde region on earth. They have plenty of money, however, and they buy a lot from American and other Western “defense industries” — death merchants – so, with public opinion in tow, their power over American foreign policy rivals Israel’s.

For that, it helps too that they are also Israel’s ally, at least where Iran is concerned. Neither they nor the Israelis want to talk about it, but the fact remains.

To the Sunni theocrats in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, the Shi’a theocrats in Iran are heretics. Worse, they are also competition.

For the new generation of Saudi leaders, the MBS generation, merely being obscenely rich is not enough; they want to be obscenely rich in a regional hegemon, a country that uses its oil money to become a major player on the world stage.

Too bad for them therefore that the region they want to dominate isn't big enough for two hegemonic states, their own and the Iranians'. Iran is therefore their mortal enemy, as much or more than it is Israel's.

This spells double trouble because, like Israel, they have the means to press Trump's buttons, to get him to act out.

The battle lines are therefore drawn. The only thing now keeping catastrophe at bay are Trump's conman instincts, his determination to keep the folks he has hoodwinked on board by giving them, or seeming to give them, what they think they want, and not forcing on them what they neither want nor need. They don't want a war with Iran, not now and not in any likely future, and there is nothing they need less.

Thus peace – or at least the absence of war – hangs on by a slender thread. We will know in good time whether this is enough to save the day.