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## The Israeli attack on Iran is a major failure of US power and diplomacy.



*Nuclear deterrence between two hostile countries can work when both possess nuclear capabilities. Therefore, after Israel's insane attack, the incentive for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon will only increase .*

BILL EMMOTT, FORMER EDITOR OF THE ECONOMIST

If the United States truly did not want Israel to attack Iran and its nuclear facilities, then the attack by its ally is now an all-out war that represents a major failure of American power and diplomacy.

This failure should not be attributed entirely to President Donald Trump, as the path had already been forged by his predecessor, Joe Biden. However, it exposes the true nature of Trump's foreign policy: loud talk and weak action, leading to strategic incoherence.

This is the attack that successive US administrations have feared for at least two decades and therefore sought to prevent. They have feared such an attack because the consequences of a war between the Middle East's only known nuclear power, Israel, and the region's largest military force, Iran, are unknown and could be dangerously difficult to contain.

Moreover, the Americans have feared this attack because—although they have not wanted Iran to develop its own nuclear weapons and have sympathized with Israel's desire to block such development—they have been convinced that bombing could never destroy Iran's uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons facilities.

These facilities are widely distributed throughout the country and hidden deep underground. This isn't just a matter requiring a few "surgical strikes."

We can only speculate as to why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has decided to attack now. While it is clear that the penetration of Israeli intelligence agencies into Iran's political, military, and scientific leadership has been deep and impressive, the variety of contradictory messages emanating from Israel about how close Iran came to producing a usable nuclear weapon (a year, several months, just weeks) suggests that Israeli knowledge of the true state of Iran's nuclear program is sketchy.

After launching this war, Netanyahu continues with new attacks. But, as the initial missile exchanges between Tel Aviv and Tehran have shown, this will not be a simple series of symbolic strikes.

The big question is whether Iran will attack not only Israeli targets, but also American ones—perhaps military bases, warships, or embassies throughout the Middle East. And the even bigger question is how the United States will respond.

In fact, Netanyahu may well have calculated that it will be through Iranian attacks on American targets that the US military will be directly involved in this war.

His tactic might have been to tell President Trump something like this: "We've started this, but we all know we can't finish it completely, since only the enormous power of American bunker-buster bombs can destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. Your negotiations with Iran were getting nowhere: Join us, and we can end this danger for at least a generation, maybe longer."

Pressure seems to be growing in Republican circles in the United States to do just that.

America's failure in terms of power and diplomacy is due, first to Biden, but even more so to Trump, who has given Netanyahu carte blanche to do whatever he wants in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. He did this by continuing to supply arms to Israel regardless of its actions and by failing to heed warnings or criticism from around the world.

And Trump compounded this effect with his ill-considered statements in favor of expelling the nearly two million Palestinians from Gaza. This would amount to ethnic cleansing, but his comments implicitly endorse the views of far-right members of the Israeli government, who not only consider a Palestinian state undesirable but also believe that its formation should be actively prevented.

While Netanyahu has resumed his war in Gaza against the Palestinian people, President Trump has turned his attention to making money in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

His administration did attempt to negotiate a deal with Iran over its uranium enrichment program. However, so far, those negotiations did not appear conducive to a better agreement than the 2015 deal, which Trump abandoned in 2018 during his first term.

So it would be reasonable for Netanyahu to assume that if Trump didn't like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that the United States and Europe had agreed to with Iran in 2015, he could now be persuaded to support military strikes.

In the short term, that assumption has proven correct. Although the United States appears to have played no part in the Israeli attack, Trump's first move has been to try to exploit the threat of further Israeli attacks to force Iran to make further concessions in the Oman talks, or wherever they resume. However, this is unlikely to succeed, at least until Iran has carried out a significant retaliation.

Whatever happens now—and we should all be prepared for very bad things to happen—this attack will confirm a general reality about nuclear weapons: While it is true, as Israel and Trump will undoubtedly say, that Iran was attacked to prevent it from obtaining a nuclear bomb, the Iranians and others know that they would not have been attacked if they had already possessed such a bomb.

The incentive for Iran (like North Korea, Pakistan, and India before it) to acquire a nuclear weapon as a deterrent will only increase, and that incentive will be shared by other countries. This is the paradox of Israel's insane attack.

Nuclear deterrence between two hostile countries can work when both possess nuclear capabilities—a deterrence that almost certainly helped contain the conflict between India and Pakistan last month over terrorism and the disputed region of Kashmir. But when only one of the hostile countries possesses that capability, it can be destabilizing.

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