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Iran: Don?t intervene

by GWYNNE DYER

Any day now, the United States will ?come to the rescue? of the protesters in the streets of Iran's cities and American bombers will unleash ?hell? on the minions of the theocratic regime ? or not, as the case may be.

It's been more than three weeks since the demos started (Dec. 29) and Trump's threats are getting old. His latest exhortation to the protesters, whose will to continue seems to be fraying a bit, told them once again that ?Help is on the way!? But there is no useful way that he can keep his promise. Bombs alone won't work.

Trump's bombers cannot eliminate the elite Revolutionary Guard troops and Basij militiamen who are killing the protesters without flattening the cities they all live in together. His high-tech missiles can pick off the regime's political leadership in their homes, but others will simply replace them.

We saw how smoothly President Ebrahim Raisolsadati was replaced by Masoud Pezeshkian when the former was killed in a helicopter crash in 2024. There are three designated successors to the 86-year-old Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This is not a regime that will crumble because of a few deaths.

A full-scale invasion might do the trick, but Donald Trump couldn't put ?boots on the ground' even if he wanted to. Given his understandable reluctance to incur serious American military casualties, bombs are the only form of violence he can use against the regime of the ayatollahs. So where are they?

As usual with Trump, it was ?speak first and think later', but his long delay before acting suggests that he has finally grasped the nature of the difficulty. He will no doubt bomb a bit in the end, but it won't help.

Non-violent protests of the sort that brought down the Shah 46 years ago are no longer reliable. Every tyrannical regime has studied the techniques and learned to counter them. The new wisdom is that if you control the streets (kill as many protesters as necessary), take over the mass media, and shut down the internet, you can probably smother the protests eventually.

The revolution of 1979 that brought the current regime to power was a classic early example of non-violent revolution, rendered even more effective by the reverence for martyrdom that is very strong in the Shia branch of Islam.

Day after day the protesters came out on the streets, willing martyrs for the cause, and eventually the army refused to shoot them any more so the revolution won. Iran's current constitution talks about ?60,000 martyrs?, but subsequent research suggests that the real death toll was between 2,000 and 3,000. It was still enough to overthrow the king.

The killing got off to a much slower start in the protests that were triggered by a collapse of Iran's currency last month, but they have accelerated dramatically in the past few days. The latest figures for the dead range between 2,000 and 2,400, so why are we not seeing the same demoralization in the ranks of the oppressors as in 1979 ? and what does this portend?

In general, it confirms the conclusion that non-violent revolution is no longer the sure-fire proposition that many people imagined it was 40 years ago. (New tactics always elicit new counter-tactics.)

For Iran in particular, it means that this attempt to overthrow the country's theocratic regime, despite the courage and determination of the people in the streets, could go either way. Indeed, some protesters are so frustrated that they are resorting to violence themselves: about 10 per cent of the reported fatalities are officials and soldiers of the regime.

It's doubtful that Trump has bothered to learn much about either Iran or the history of revolutions, but his political instincts are good.

A quick hit-and-run on Venezuela can be effective and perhaps even profitable; attacking a very large country in the Middle East in support of a revolution that may fail is not a great plan.

One might add that even a successful intervention that brings the tyrants down may turn out to be counter-productive. It is possible to imagine successor regimes that are even worse than the current one. It's more than four decades since Iranians had a real choice, and nobody knows what will come out of the box if it is opened now.

What we do know is that regime change imposed by the West on countries in the Middle East ? e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya ? has an almost perfect record of catastrophic failure. Trump has promised too much already to do absolutely nothing about the massacre of protesters in Iran, but he should do the absolute minimum he thinks he can get away with.