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Iran: Much ado about nothing

by GWYNNE DYER

I don't get a lot of face-time with Donald Trump, but his rant on Tuesday in front of the chopper that was to take him to the airport and on to the NATO summit in Brussels was the first time I heard him say ?fuck' in front of live microphones ? and it was clearly about Binyamin Netanyahu.

It took Trump a long time to realise that he has been played by the Israeli prime minister, but he was clearly having a moment of clarity. It won't last, because he cannot bear the idea that he was outsmarted, but in the moment he was absolutely churning with rage.

?Israel, as soon as we made the deal (the ceasefire), they came out and they dropped a load of bombs the likes of which I've never seen before, the biggest load that we've seen,? Trump said. ?I'm not happy with Israel.?

Well, surprise! Netanyahu was counting on weeks or months of bombing Iran alongside his American pals, not only to permanently degrade the country's economy but also to distract international public attention from what he is doing to the Palestinians in Gaza.

Further Trumpish unhappiness may follow. The Iranians, if they wished, could now simply agree with Trump's foolish boast that Iran's three key nuclear sites were ?completely and fully obliterated? by the 14 ?Massive Ordnance Penetrator' bombs that American B-2 bombers dropped on the sites on June 22.

If Iran's 60 per cent-enriched uranium (about 400 kg of it) really was in those tunnels ninety metres underground, it's still probably intact: the preliminary U.S. intelligence assessment is that last Saturday's bombing would not have eliminated it. But it was probably no longer in the tunnels at all, since the Iranians are not fools.

If the Iranians did get it all away to other hiding places scattered around the country in the ten days between Trump's first threats and the arrival of the B-2s, Iran can now use it as collateral in a deal that puts all the country's uranium back under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards in return for an end to sanctions.

The easiest thing would be simply to revive the 2015 deal that limited Iran's enrichment of uranium to 3.67 per cent, suitable only for power plants. Iran was fully open to inspection and the deal was working to everybody's satisfaction until Donald Trump tore it up on a whim in 2018. Iran would be glad to have it back, since the sanctions have crippled the economy.

The problem will be changing the deal just enough to avoid offending Trump's vanity, while not changing it so much that it loses credibility in the eyes of the other signatories. Since Trump rarely reads the small print closely, just changing the words around while retaining the meaning would probably be enough to persuade him that he is signing a new and better deal.

As a sweetener, if necessary, they could arrange for Trump to ?win' the Nobel Peace Prize he has obsessed about ever since Barack Obama got one. It costs nothing and it's not worth much anymore, but it's the sort of trinket that would appeal to the U.S. president.

In the meantime the ceasefire probably will hold because neither Iran nor the United States has anything to gain from a direct clash and Trump has probably now learned not to let Netanyahu use the US Air Force in his wars. This will draw the focus back to Israel's brutal attempt to drive all 2.1 million Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip, but that is a separate issue.

So what have we learned from this disagreeable but ultimately non-disastrous episode? The first lesson, obviously, is that limiting access to the ear of Trump 2.0 is critical. Letting people like Binyamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin whisper in it is just asking for trouble, and the grown-ups in Trump's entourage should provide a constant flow of alternative diversions.

Secondly, you can trust the Iranian regime, nasty though it is, not to let itself be drawn into truly dangerous confrontations with the United States. Its low-key, largely symbolic responses to American attacks were a model of self-control. And by the way, the US intelligence services are still right: there is no Iranian nuclear weapons programme.

Most important, understand that the White House has become the Palace of Versailles. Donald Trump is Louis XIV, the Sun King, and the currency, as in most royal courts, is relentless, gushing flattery. The recent tweet of Mark Rutte, head of NATO, should be your model

?Mr. President, dear Donald: Congratulations and thank you for your decisive action in Iran, that was truly extraordinary, and something no one else dared to do. It makes us all safer. Donald, you have driven us to a really, really important moment for America and Europe, and the world.?

Icky, but necessary.

To shorten to 700 words, omit paragraphs 3 and 4. (?Israel...Gaza?)