

Trump in a trap

by GWYNNE DYER

Donald Trump is caught in the trap that he helped to build, and he is starting to flail against his fate. His 'war of choice', 'Operation Epic Fury', was supposed to end in 'unconditional surrender' by Tehran in just a few weeks, but if Trump ever had a plan beyond 'use massive force' it isn't working.

Trump managed to 'decapitate' much of the Iranian regime in the first hour of the American-Israeli sneak attack. (For the second time in a year, the United States attacked while still in peace talks with Iran.) However, this massacre of the old leadership class only ensured that a younger, smarter generation of true believers would lead Iran's resistance struggle.

Knowing a bit about the cult of martyrdom in Shia Islam, I am even tempted to speculate that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei knew that the US might strike that meeting and held it anyway. At any rate, it gave regime supporters more martyrs (killed by infidels) to celebrate, including the new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei's father, mother, wife and son.

Mojtaba was a hard-liner anyway, having fought as a 17-year-old volunteer in the Iran-Iraq War. (Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran with US encouragement and support in 1980-88.) There is almost zero probability that Iran's new leadership will seek a peace deal with the US and Israel - and no good reason that it needs to.

The American staff officers who planned Operation Foolish Fantasy counted up all Iran's worn-out fighters and decrepit warships and creaking logistics and concluded that they couldn't hold their own in a fight with America and Israel for even two weeks. Nobody asked if that was the fight they had to win.

The Iranian planners, well aware that they couldn't win a stand-up fight with Israel's hi-tech weapons, considered where they did have leverage and decided that fossil fuels and Western economies were their enemies' vulnerable flank. Stop the flow of oil and gas, Western economies will tank, and they'll have to make a deal with the ayatollahs.

(I am assuming here that after the murder of several tens of thousands of civilian protesters in the streets of Iranian cities in January, nobody is going to try another uprising until the regime is clearly, irrevocably losing. It's a long way from that now.)

So: oil again. Fifty years after the first oil embargo brought the West to its knees, you'd think that the powers-that-be might have switched to a less vulnerable energy source, but, you know - 'the money's good and I just want to make my pile and then we can all switch to a safer, cleaner, closer source of energy...' Repeat for fifty years.

Can the United States and its allies break Iran's closure of the narrow Strait of Hormuz, which is currently stopping 20% of the world's oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) traffic from entering or leaving the Persian Gulf? Technically, yes. Indeed, France's President Emmanuel Macron has suggested a multinational naval operation to do exactly that.

But Operation Blind Rage may not be the best answer either. The price of oil has almost doubled and the world economy is sliding into a major recession. Fighting might sink ships in the narrow channel and block it that way. And in the middle of it all is Donald Trump, unable to stop what he started and beginning to realise that he has been had by Binyamin Netanyahu.

We will never know whether Netanyahu genuinely believes there is a nuclear problem with Iran, but we can be certain that the Israeli intelligence services (and the American ones and everybody else's too) have assured him that Iran is at least five years away from deliverable nuclear weapons.

Netanyahu first warned that Iran would have nukes 'in three to five years' in 1992. He has repeated the warning at frequent intervals, saying it was one, two, three or at most five years away. But it was just a useful fiction: nobody takes 34 years to make

nuclear weapons if they are serious about it. Consider Pakistan. Consider North Korea. Consider Israel itself.

The lie was useful because it enabled Netanyahu to portray Iran as a threat not just to Israel (which it was) but also to rich and powerful Western countries. His goal has always been to draw those countries into a direct conflict with Iran, and with Trump he has finally succeeded.

To escape again, Trump would have to accept that he has been wrong, so probably not. The likeliest alternative, unfortunately, is for Trump to decide that the solution is yet more force. Perhaps including 'Boots on the Ground', because it will be hard to make the Strait of Hormuz safe without controlling the Iranian islands on the north side of the Strait.