

War on Iran: A series of miscalculations

by GWYNNE DYER

Still not four full weeks into the war, and already Donald Trump's 'short-term excursion' to decapitate the Iranian regime with a surprise attack and impose harsh terms on the defeated survivors has morphed into a global economic crisis and a region-wide war that could destroy the wealth of all the countries on both sides of the Gulf. At the very least.

Back in January Trump was high on his success in changing the regime in Venezuela (just a bit), so he was an easy mark for Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's suggestion that he could do the same to Iran. Netanyahu probably knew better than that himself, but his life's goal has been to inveigle the United States into a joint attack on Israel's greatest enemy.

Trump swallowed the plan hook, line and sinker, and they cobbled together a story about a new nuclear threat from Iran.

Nobody really believed it, maybe not even Trump. His Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, wrote last week that 'Iran's nuclear enrichment program has been obliterated. There have been no efforts since (US air strikes last June) to rebuild their enrichment capability,' and she probably tried to tell him that herself.

Even if untrue, the Israeli-American allegations and threats were grave enough to frighten the Iranians back to the negotiating table, and this time they surprised the American team by offering major concessions. The new offer didn't meet every US demand in full, but it certainly warranted further discussion and the next meeting was fixed for 3 March.

Oman's foreign minister Badr Albusaidi, who was mediating the talks, explains what happened then: 'It was a shock but not a surprise when on 28 February just a few hours after the latest and most substantive talks Israel and America again launched an unlawful military strike against the peace that had briefly appeared really possible.'

Even then, US foreign secretary Marco Rubio says Israel had to push Trump into the war by telling him that otherwise it would launch the surprise attack alone. (The US would still have to follow, but the Iranians would then be on the alert and there would be more American casualties.) The Israeli tail was definitely wagging the American dog at this point.

So the 'decapitation' strike went in as planned and killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and most of Iran's other senior leaders but it made no difference whatever to Iran's long-planned responses. Khamenei knew from past experience that Trump favoured surprise attacks during negotiations and had taken the appropriate precautions.

If you fear decapitation, turn yourself into a Hydra, a many-headed monster. In the jargon of the regime, which in the 1980s survived an eight-year war of attrition against a far better armed invader (Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which had strong support from the United States), the strategy is known as the doctrine of 'the fourth successor.'

That is why the regime was not destroyed by the initial 'decapitating' strike and has not crumbled under the relentless bombing of subsequent weeks. Khamenei ordered each senior official and officer to designate, in order of preference, up to four potential successors capable of replacing him. Knock off one, up pops another.

Iran's system has been created to endure and outlast the superior weapons technologies that its enemies will bring against it, and so far, it is doing very well. The stockpile of missiles is doing havoc to the economies of America's Gulf allies, the Strait of Hormuz is blocked to international shipping (although Chinese and Indian tankers pass through), and time is on Iran's side.

In effect the initiative has passed into the hands of the Iranians, and they only have to go on doing what they are already doing to keep it. Their enemies have to figure out what to do next, and their choices now diverge: the Israelis want to go on bombing until the remaining Iranians overthrow their government (good luck with that!), and Trump just wants to get out.

His usual strategy (in business) has been to declare a victory and leave, but in this case his own pride gets in the way. His attempts to shift the blame for pulling out to the 'cowardly' Europeans or assorted other bystanders fall flat, and the escalation that would be required to bring the regime to its knees is so big and dangerous that it even frightens him.

So Trump runs back and forth in fury and confusion, changing his story twice a day. Obviously this cannot go on forever, but it may last long enough for me to write another article in which I calmly expound his viable remaining options. None come to mind right now except 'Boots on the Ground' or a small nuclear weapon (both highly undesirable).