

The Iran Crisis, #1: Elijah Magnier on 'The Countdown between Tehran & Washington'

Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Elijah Magnier on 2/25/2026. The video is [here](#).

[Helena Cobban]

Hi everybody, I'm Helena Cobban, I'm the President of Just World Educational and I'm delighted today-- it is February the 25th, and I'm really excited that we have as our guest today Elijah Magnier. Elijah, welcome back to our Gaza and the World series, this is part two on the Iran conflict.

[Elijah Magnier]

Hello Helena, it's a pleasure to be with you.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, really Elijah, you've been doing some great writing and the most recent piece you have is called "The Countdown Between Washington and Tehran." You survey the military as well as the strategic components and the political geopolitical components of this crisis. I urge everybody to go and look for you on the internet and subscribe to your great writings.

At the end of this piece you say historical evidence indicates that wars often commence not because they are inevitable but because leaders convince themselves they are manageable. Maybe just for starters you could unpack some of that.

[Elijah Magnier]

Well, it means that the United States is not going to toward a promenade in Iran. Iran proved to have a ballistic missile that can hit precisely the target. The Israeli-US interception missiles and all the forces spread in the Middle East proved during the June 2025 war their incapability to intercept most of the Iranian ballistic missiles.

We're not talking about the other type of less modern missile, less advanced missile, but the ballistic one that the Iranian have developed. We have seen many evidence in Israel that they reached a target. Therefore, when the Iranians are saying this is a war that will hit all the US military bases in the Middle East, it means Iran has the capability to inflict real damage on the US bases, on the reputation of the US bases, and above all on the US allies that is Israel.

This is what the American administration is fearing from Iran's reaction and cannot expect that, okay, we go to war, we bomb Iran and we return and that's the end of it. The Iranians will retaliate.

[Helena Cobban]

This is in essence a classic deterrent threat that the Iranians are issuing. They're saying that last time in June we were restrained, and this I think came from Ayatollah Khamenei himself-- "and next time we will not be restrained." In addition to the locations and targets that you mentioned that could be hit is of course also the ships in this so-called Armada, the carrier strike groups, the two carrier strike groups.

The Ayatollah also specifically mentioned that the warships are capable of inflicting great harm, but they are also very vulnerable. So there is a classic sort of counter deterrence on each side that is not at the nuclear level because here in the United States, people usually think of deterrence as being a nuclear thing, but it's not. It also exists at the non-nuclear level as such has happened, such as existed for a long time between Hezbollah, for example, and Israel, and the Israelis were capable of taking that out or taking it down considerably.

So now they are proposing, according to your piece and everything else I've read, that there should be a limit of 300 kilometers on Iran's ballistic missile capability, quite separate from all the demands about nuclear enrichment capability. So my understanding is that that is a key Israeli demand. Is it also a key American demand or not?

[Elijah Magnier]

You've mentioned so many important points. If I may answer to a few of these. First of all, what we observe now is from the side of the Americans, it is called deterrence by narrative.

Therefore, the Americans are building up the narrative, threatening to bomb Iran, saying that the war is almost imminent. We see the newspaper saying it's going to happen at the end of the week. It's going to happen this weekend.

The administration ordered pizza on a Saturday and Sunday. There are no holidays. So all this psychological deterrence by narrative is not going to affect the Iranians that have been under threat since 1979, that immediately after that, the Iran-Iraq war, and then the US sanctions on the Iranians.

Now, in relation to the military, the Americans will not dare to bring their armada, the carriers, very close to the Iranians, because they are aware that they can be hit and damaged. Now, you're right that deterrence is not related to nuclear weapons, because as you rightly mentioned, several examples, but about all the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Russians did not use nuclear weapons, and they have thousands of nuclear missiles. They did not use one, because actually this is not something that is used in conventional war.

It doesn't mean that the Americans will not use it against Iran, depending how hard the Iranians will hit the Americans, if the Americans really want to destroy the Iranian infrastructure, civilian infrastructure, and economy, including energy, electricity, etc., which means they are really hitting the existence of Iran. They want to cripple the country, push it into total chaos, then the Iranians will be like a cat in a corner. Of course, the Americans are a superpower, they have all the needed missiles, they have hundreds of jets, they have allies in the region above all the Israelis, with at least 200 to 250 jets ready in action.

They have more than 340, but they can use between 200 and 250, so they can really create a big damage on Iran, but Iran doesn't need to win. Iran needs to hold its ground, and Iran needs to retaliate and inflict damage on those who consider they can destroy Iran, and then the Iranian, by holding the ground, this is a victory for Iran, and the Americans will fail to achieve their objectives, and that is also another victory. Therefore, what we are looking at now here, is we're looking at the consequences of the American hit on the Iranians and the reaction of Iran.

And as the reaction, Iran said it very clearly, now the Americans are thinking what Donald Trump said, that why, and that was a release by Steve Witkoff, the US envoy, why they're not really complying, why they're not intimidated.

[Helena Cobban]

Actually, if I can just interject there, what Witkoff said is why they don't "capitulate". I mean, a diplomat would never use-- a real diplomat would never use that kind of language about somebody that he's negotiating with. But anyway, yes, you're right.

He expressed surprise that Iran hasn't complied, as you say, or capitulated, as Steve Witkoff actually said, yeah.

[Elijah Magnier]

That is very important, because it shows the level of ignorance of the Iranian mentality, culture, and the Iranian reaction. So the American envoy expected him and his boss, Donald Trump, that we go and we launch threat against Iran, and Iran will say, okay, what do you want me to do? And I'm ready to do anything you want.

No, Iran is preparing the missiles, but also sending the chief diplomat, the foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, to say we are ready to negotiate. And here is the point. The Americans are not saying to the Iranians, during the negotiation in Vienna, or in Muscat, Oman, that they want the missile program. But then they are sending messages to Iranians saying the missile program, zero enrichment, and no relationship with allies, no finance to groups like Hezbollah, or the Iraqi resistance, or the Yemeni Ansarullah.

So this double language and this lack of clarity from the Americans, including what Donald Trump is saying that he has decimated and obliterated the Iranian nuclear program. And then Witkoff is saying Iran is a week away from having nuclear bombs. And then Donald Trump saying in the Congress, that he will not allow Iran to use nuclear power on their missile that will reach one day America, which is totally untrue.

They don't have-- The maximum range of [Iranian missiles] is 2000 kilometers. And America is between nine to 10,000 kilometers away. It is America that is coming to the Middle East in its bases.

And if this is what Donald Trump is referring to, then the answer is yes. The Americans are within hundreds of kilometers reach of the Iranian missiles in Bahrain, in Qatar, in Saudi Arabia, in the Emirates, in Jordan, in Jordan is more than 1500. But yes, within the reach of the Iranian missiles, if this is what he meant.

But the United States of America in the geographic location, that is not true.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I believe he also mentioned a threat to Europe from the Iranian missiles. So obviously, an attempt to get the Europeans on board his war plans. My understanding is they are somewhat wary of getting involved in the war plans.

The British, for example, have said they're not sure they're prepared to let the Americans use the base in Diego Garcia. But I'm sure the British are speaking out of two sides of their mouth.

But in terms of other allies or other third parties, there's also the Gulf Arabs who have said that they don't want to be a party to any attack on Iran, which is different from during earlier iterations, like 10 years ago or whatever.

But what is your understanding of the position of the Gulf Arab states? Because they do host the most important American bases in the region at Al Udeid and the other one in Bahrain, as we discussed in our previous discussion about it about a month ago.

[Elijah Magnier]

Now, for the Europeans, there is a problem of legality. There is no evidence for them that Iran is violating international laws for the Europeans to explain to their citizens that we're going to go to war against Iran. It is illegal, unlawful, and there are no grounds.

It's just Donald Trump who decides he has the power and he has the military, and he considers this is a problem for me and for my allies. I'm going to go and declare war on Iran that is violating all international laws and the United Nations Charter. And on the contrary, Iran has a right according to Article 51 to defend itself and to hit America, even the United States of America, but it doesn't have the possibility to reach the American territory. But it has the right to do so in case it is attacked.

Now, the Arabs, that's a very good question. For the Arabs, it is not possible for them to see Iran winning because this means what the Americans have convinced the Arabs, that Iran is a threat, although Iran never declared war on any Arab state. On the contrary, it is Iraq that declared war on Iran.

They are afraid of a strong Iran, but they are afraid of a weak Iran or destroyed Iran because that means Benjamin Netanyahu, that is considered an international criminal court fugitive for his war crime, will be the strongest man in the Middle East. So they are afraid of the Israelis, particularly when Israel bombed Qatar and said, we will bomb any country when we feel threatened in our national security. And that is really very elastic, the Israeli national security.

They can bomb anywhere and say, well, we felt the threat and therefore that's a preemptive attack that doesn't exist in international law. So they are afraid of that. But then they are afraid of the chaos that can be created in Iran that has borders with seven countries.

What's going to happen to all these countries? What's going to happen to Iraq, to Afghanistan, to Pakistan, to Turkey? All these countries are related also to the Middle East.

It's just across the sea and you have the Emirates, you have Qatar, you have Saudi Arabia. So all these countries will feel affected and the whole Middle East will remain unstable for decades if there is a chaos in Iran. This is what they are afraid of.

And then again, they are afraid of the Americans using their military base, which means Iran is going to bomb them because bombing a U.S. military base in Saudi Arabia and Qatar is still bombing the country. And that will put them in a difficult position with Iran that they have to cut relationship. So in any way, they are losers.

They're not winning on any front. This is why they're a bit reluctant. The only point is they really don't want to see Iran coming out strong and all the other possibilities are damaging to the Arab countries in case of war.

So the damage is higher.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, of course, you've mentioned so many things and Pakistan is really important for all those Gulf countries. I mean, most of the pilots and military men in UAE military are Pakistanis, is my understanding. I mean, they certainly don't have their own people and they have very close relationships with Pakistan, which has that long border with Iran.

So you're quite right to say it's not just in the Arabian Persian Gulf. It's also all down the Arabian Sea and into--

[Elijah Magnier]

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, all these countries.

[Helena Cobban]

And of course, the world economy. Let's not forget that. Let's not forget the Straits of Hormuz, which any closure or attack in the Straits of Hormuz would immediately impact not just all the neighboring countries, but the global economy. So we're talking about something that is much broader.

And anyway, even without the oil factor, I think the dimensions of this confrontation are much broader than just West Asia because of the role that Iran and Israel respectively play within the global order.

[Elijah Magnier]

Yeah, but that's only because one man, Donald Trump, has decided to follow Benjamin Netanyahu's instructions and go to war on behalf of Israel and bring all the Americans

behind him and then pay the price. What about the US economy? What about the Asian economy, the European economy, the African economy?

The Iranians were involved in a military maneuver the other day, and they closed the Strait of Hormuz for a few hours. And we have seen all the tankers piling up in the line waiting outside because they could not reach the destination to fill up their tanker with oil and to transport it to the rest of the world. So between 19 to 20 percent of the world's energy crosses that area.

That is very serious on the local currency of every single country in the world. The price of oil is going to go beyond hundreds of dollars and all that will affect every single person on earth at the exception of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu.

[Helena Cobban]

So you focus quite rightly on the role of Donald Trump at present, but I would just like to interject that I think that, you know, in 2024, Joe Biden would have been just as eager to follow the Israelis bidding and do as they said. Because from the Israeli point of view, it took them most of 2024 to recover from what happened on October 7th, 2023. But by the end of 2024, they were ready to go.

I mean, you know, with the collapse of Hezbollah in September of 2024, and with the collapse of the Assad government in Syria in December of 2024. So starting at the beginning of last year, they were ready to go on the offensive at a broad regional level. And of course, you know, continuing their actions, their horrendous military actions against Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank.

But now we have a situation where the Jewish Israeli public is eager to extend Israel's control over broad swathes of West Asia. And that's, you know, Donald Trump has bought into that, to some extent, not as much, I think, as his ambassador in Israel, Mike Huckabee, who openly states that it's fine by him, if Israel controls everything from the Nile to the Euphrates, which, of course, includes like Jordan, Iraq, a huge chunk of Iraq, huge chunk of Saudi Arabia, huge chunk of Egypt, and all the rest of it. So that's Mike Huckabee's vision, which is shared by, you know, large numbers of Jewish Israelis.

I don't think Donald Trump wholly buys that vision. He wants to make money above everything. We know that.

But he doesn't really have a clue about anything to do with the politics, the balance, the strategic dynamic of the region. So he finds himself sort of up a tree right now, and trying to find a way to get down, maybe, you know, there's so many people in his MAGA base here, who are skeptical of Israel's claims, and who very, very strongly don't want to see American troops entangled in conflicts in distant lands. So is there a way for him to climb down the tree?

[Elijah Magnier]

I beg to differ here, because the first official, US official who declared that in the last few years, even before being elected, just a couple of months before being elected, was Donald

Trump, when he said, and he made this gesture in his hand, Israel is so small, tiny, it needs to be enlarged. And this is what Donald Trump said before being elected. Donald Trump lied to his people, because when he said he promised to stop the war in Gaza, he did not stop the war in Gaza.

He saved the Israelis from this war, and gave them the possibility to continue bombing Gaza, and secure that the Palestinian resistance would not retaliate. This is what he did. He stopped the devastating Israeli war on Gaza, as it used to be in the last two years, but then not in the last five months when the Israelis had a free hand in Gaza to destroy, to prevent the trucks from coming.

They allow 125 to 150 [trucks daily] out of 600. They did not open the Rafah crossing, and they are the one who have the ultimate word on who crosses and not, and the people in need are selected according to their biometric and fingerprint and facial recognition. So the Israelis decide who crosses and who does not.

And they did not allow 15,000 urgently in need of medical assistance to cross Rafah. They allowed a few hundreds only. So no, Donald Trump did not stop the war, and will not reconstruct Gaza.

He's reconstructing the path under the control of the Israeli, and he will create camps in Rafah to select the Palestinian who can cross on the other side, once the reconstruction start or not. And then he did not say that he's going to go to war against Iran. He did not say how he is going to permit Israel to be enlarged.

Enlarging Israel means going to war with Israeli neighbors. This is what Donald Trump did not really make clear when he said he wants Israel to be bigger. This is what Benjamin Netanyahu is doing.

He's going more toward Lebanon, occupying hills in Lebanon that belong to the Lebanese, occupying territory in Syria that belongs to the Syrian, occupy 53% of Gaza, and turn it into settlement. This is what the Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, is saying, that he's sending his own settlers into Gaza. So Benjamin Netanyahu was not honest to the voters when he said he is a man of peace.

And then he gave up. This is not a man of peace who's saying, I abduct the president of Venezuela and keep all the Chavistas in place for no reason, no legal reason. And then he's going to go to war against Iran for no legal reason, just disregarding the existence of the United Nations and putting sanctions on the International Court of Justice, the highest court in the world, only because it has imposed sanctions.

Or consider war criminals as war criminals, saying the spade as a spade. That was the guilt of the prosecutor of the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court. So this is what we are facing today.

It is not Huckabee that was appointed by Donald Trump, knowing that he is a Christian Zionist, who has no clue what Zionist is, because I heard his interview and he considered Zionism is related to the right of Israel to be on the Palestinian land. And that's it. Zionism is much deeper than that.

He speaks about the Bible and the Torah-- and the Zionist founders are atheists. They're not religious. So this is why I say, well, Donald Trump is not that innocent.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. So you mentioned, obviously, international law, which I think is an important thing for us to touch base on right now, because obviously the kidnapping of President Maduro was completely without any basis in international law. So was the US-Israeli attack on Iran last June.

I mean, that was launched in clear coordination by both parties, but with Israel at the tip of the spear, if you like, on June 13th, in the early hours of June 13th, when out of the blue, they attacked many basic and important Iranian military facilities and assassinated dozens of Iranian leaders in the scientific and military fields. That happened at a time when the Iranian leadership was actively considering its position in the latest negotiation with Donald Trump over the nuclear issue. So I've been describing that for a long time as entrapment by diplomacy.

And we saw the same thing in the attack on the Hamas leadership in Qatar in September. So back in June, there was not a peep from the UN Security Council that I recall. I mean, maybe they met, but they didn't issue any call for anything, knowing that obviously, Washington has a veto.

But one would hope that there would be activities behind the scenes by all the members of the Security Council to try to figure out a way to deal with this gross illegality. And we have this illegality happening now. What are you seeing from, for example, China or the Europeans or other members of the Security Council?

Is Algeria still a member of the Security Council? Or is the Security Council completely irrelevant at this point?

[Elijah Magnier]

Well, it's a decision of one man who is disregarding United Nations and disregarding international laws. He is saying it. He doesn't give a toss about international law.

He doesn't care about United Nations. The only thing he said that he's going to send some money to the UN, so he makes sure that the UN is still functioning as a front of a building that exists, but without any power.

The United Nations' power comes from its members. And if the members of the United Nations want to do whatever they want, the UN doesn't have an army to stop that. And they certainly can't go against Donald Trump, who is the president of the most powerful country in the world. Therefore, all the members are very limited in what they can do, because the US has a veto power.

And the US can stop any decision approved or forwarded by Russia or China or any other member of the UN or permanent member, the 15 permanent members of the United

Nations Security Council. Therefore, with the US going out and doing whatever it wants, occupying and kidnapping and bombing, there's nothing no one can do. But one thing, today, we have the confirmation that for the next three years, at least, we live in a jungle where there is no law.

The powerful can do whatever he wants, and attack a weak country and do whatever he wants in grabbing more land, and nobody's going to stop it.

[Helena Cobban]

So I would like to first of all-- I tend to agree with you, but I have more hope. I mean, I've had hope in the past, and it's always been dashed regarding Gaza. I've, you know, had hope that there would be, you know, a Uniting for peace resolution from the General Assembly that could bypass or override the US veto in the Security Council, and that has never happened.

And we have this figure here in Washington, DC, whom I call the Discombobulator-in-Chief, because, you know, he upsets everything domestically, internationally, in international trade, in international, like governance, like, he's quite happy to tear up the UN Charter, as you mentioned. But still, the US population represents less than 5% of the world's population. So if we want to have any claim to the equality of all human persons, then it's outrageous that 95% of humanity has to dance around because of this, you know, this madman that we have here in Washington, DC.

So I want to just circle back a moment to China's role. I think that, you know, I've noticed, back in June, that the Chinese military tech and communications tech was an important factor in the ability of Iran to withstand that assault that they suffered on June 13, and for the following 11 days. So, you know, China has a, an established and fairly strong relationship with... Iran.

China also, back in early 2023, demonstrated its diplomatic capabilities in the Gulf, by mediating a reconciliation between the Saudis and the Iranians. So, you know, they are real players in the in the diplomacy of the Gulf region today, in a way that they weren't five or 10 years ago. Plus, of course, we've seen them actively trying to build alternatives to the US-controlled financial system, the SWIFT system, which is essentially controlled by Brussels, but really, from here, from the Department of Treasury in Washington, DC, so the Chinese have developed alternative payment systems.

Is this a real factor that can help Iran to withstand all the pressure of sanctions?

[Elijah Magnier]

The Chinese are the biggest importers of Iranian oil. Nevertheless, they can always find an alternative. We need to understand that China has approved five major sanctions against Iran throughout the decades, and they did not veto these sanctions at the United Nations.

However, China has supported Iran with plenty of military hardware, intelligence, equipment, and communication system that helps Iran to be more advanced than it is. Furthermore, China is the second biggest trader with Israel. China is one of the biggest with

the United States and doesn't want to go to war with anyone or be busy by reducing the growth of its economy and invest in wars that doesn't concern it directly.

Anything that is going to push China to buy the oil a bit more with a higher price, China prefer to do so rather than going to war on behalf of any other country. It is not going to happen. The Chinese people overestimate or overconsider their potential role in supporting Iran in case of war.

The role of China is supportive in supplying Iran with some of its needs, not all of it, but not to the point to anger the Americans. Even if a war between Iran and America is not confirmed yet, I must say, despite all the rhetoric and the screaming and the drum of war that are coming from the United States, it's not something that is certain. On the contrary, the possibilities are 50-50 today and there are negotiations tomorrow, Thursday, where the Iranians are going to present an already studied and thoughtful plan to discuss with the Americans if they did not make up their mind to go to war.

Therefore, we're still in the negotiation. For China to take that as granted and say, I'm going to go to war and support Iran, it is not going to happen.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes, I mean, I think those are really useful words for us to remember. Elijah, I think we're going to have to wrap this up right now. Boy, I always really enjoy talking with you and hope to have you back on this series again.

Just to remind listeners and viewers here that this is part two, actually, this conversation is inaugurating part two of our ongoing project, Gaza and the World. This part of the project is focusing on the Iran conflict as such. We have three more great speakers lined up for tomorrow.

We're going to have Bill Quandt. Friday, we're going to have Ray McGovern. Then next Monday, we're going to have Trita Parsi.

Actually, it's just confirmed now, Wednesday of next week, March 4th, we're going to have Ambassador Chas Freeman. Then hopefully, we'll be able to fit another conversation with you, Elijah. Anybody listening or watching this, please go to our website, www.justworldeducational.org.

You can learn a whole lot more about the project. You can click on the Donate button and give us some support, because all of this is done without major... We don't have any big foundation support that keeps us agile and frees us to follow the kind of projects that are really interesting, important, and timely.

Once again, big thanks to you, Elijah Magnier. You stay safe and talk to you again soon.

[Elijah Magnier]

Thank you for having me.