

# The Iran Crisis #16: Helena Cobban on Hormuz and 5,000 Years of Strategic Power

*Transcript of a presentation Helena Cobban originally recorded on 4/24/2026, with an intro from 4/27/26. The video is [here](#). The audio is on [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#).*

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational.

And this is a bit of a special production for our Iran crisis project, which we've been running since February 24th, 25th-- anyway, before the US Israeli unprovoked war of aggression against Iran was launched on February 28th. So on Saturday, April 25, I'd been invited to speak at a conference in Olinda, California, organized by the Mount Diablo Peace and Justice Center. But I couldn't be in California.

So I prepared and prerecorded a 25 minute talk for them. And I had to prerecord it 24 hours beforehand. So I don't know if you recall that period, it was a very fraught and tense period, because nobody knew what whether the United States was going to be launching a new attack, along with its Israeli ally, or if Vice President J.D. Vance was going to be going to Islamabad to participate in negotiations.

So I had to be able to say something that would hold up with that 24-hour lead time. And I thought, well, I'll take the long view. And so my presentation basically was on the Hormuz Strait and its role in 5,000 years of human history.

So anyway, here's how it went:

Hi, everybody. Thanks so much for inviting me to come and speak at the conference.

I'm sorry, I can't be with you in person. But I just want to thank all the folks at the Mount Diablo Peace and Justice Center and all the other great presenters who are there. Wish I could have been there.

But I will be coming to the Bay Area in early June. So maybe you can find out from Rick Sterling or somebody about what I'll be doing when I'm there then. But here we are.

How are you all doing? It's been 30 months of hell. And then most recently, 56 days of hell of the Iran war. And of course, Black Wednesday in Lebanon on April 8. And this past week, the killing of the journalist Amal Khalil there, the deliberate targeted killing of Amal in the same way that my good friend, Dr. Refaat Alareer was targeted and killed by the Israelis in Gaza in December of 2023.

I worked for six years as a journalist in Lebanon at the beginning of the war there, which started 50 years ago this month. Just FYI. *[Actually, 51 years ago...]* So how about this sense of time that we all have? Now, I'm waiting for news eagerly on a minute by minute basis.

It's quite crazy. Are the Iranians going to meet in Islamabad? Are the US-Israeli aggressors going to renew their attack? You know, you're kind of living on the edge of your chair the whole time, second by second. It's not really good for the mental health or one's general

constitution. But it's kind of what one does these days. Personally, I find it's really useful to take a step back. And one of the things I've been working on is looking at the role of Hormuz through history.

So it has always been a key junction point in human history, in case you didn't know. In 3,000 years before the Common Era, 3,000 years BCE, that is 5,000 years ago, it was already an important connecting point between the Indus Valley civilizations and the Mesopotamian civilizations, really the cradle of human history on the Eurasian continent. And then for millennia after then, it was a key node in the very rich Indian Ocean trading zone, which stretched from the east coast of Africa from Mozambique, across India, across Southeast Asia, and up the coast of China.

I mean, that was a single connected trading zone for all those millennia. And you had the development of amazing technologies in all those regions, in particular in China, but also in India and across the whole of the trading zone. And it was a trading zone that had its own norms of freedom of navigation, and welcoming merchants here and there.

Actually, there's a great book that Janet Abu-Lughod published called "Before European Hegemony." She was an amazing historian and anthropologist. She published the book probably in the 1970s or 1980s.

It's still really worth reading because it's important to understand how the world was before we had this thing that we have now, which I call the White Supremacist International along the lines of the Communist International or the Socialist International. But what is currently referred to as Western hegemony or whatever, I think it's more accurate to refer to it as the White Supremacist International because that is what it was. And it consisted of, historically, a succession of conglomerates of adventurers and navigators motivated by two things.

Profit, that is through looting and taking, and then through the development of capitalism and the development of finance capitalism, which was an essential part of the imperial venture. The first stock exchange in the world was in Amsterdam when they were the Dutch, who were one of these five empires. So the five empires, I'm sure you know this stuff, but I'll just run through it quickly.

First of all, Portugal started in the 15th century, creeping down the coast of West Africa, around the bottom of Africa, and then entered the Indian Ocean trading zone in 1499 or maybe 1498, I forget. Anyway. And then we had Spain, which later than Portugal, succeeded in completing its Reconquista of its territory from the Muslim lords who had previously ruled it, and then still highly motivated by Islamophobia, as were the Portuguese before them.

The Spanish set out and weirdly traveled west because this crazy guy, Christopher Columbus, who had learned all his skills as a navigator with the Portuguese, had this crazy idea that he could reach China by sailing west. And when he reached the current landmass on which we are sitting, he thought it was India. And he thought the islands were Japan.

That's why they're called the West Indies. I mean, that's why the native peoples of this country were called, still are called in many cases, Indians. I mean, anyway, he was crazy, but he was lucky crazy.

We are currently ruled by somebody who is crazy, and God, I hope he's not as lucky. Anyway, that's by the way, so Portuguese, Spanish, and then we had the big Protestant powers, England and Holland, who came in, motivated much more by a desire for profit than by, well, certainly not motivated by Catholicism. And then we had the French a little bit later.

So those were the five powers, all of them perched on the extreme western end of the Eurasian landmass, that made their profit and their modern civilizations in the way that we know them now, purely through their pursuit of imperial ventures, colonial ventures, imperial seizure and taking and stealing, settler colonialism, other forms of colonialism, the things, the very things that we see Israel doing today in Palestine and Lebanon, destroying the local populations, stealing their possessions, stealing their land, erasing their culture. All of that is central to the history of the White Supremacist International, and it has been going on for well over 500 years now.

So how about Hormuz? Well, Hormuz, in 1507 of the Common Era, that was the time when a Portuguese navigator, he was called Alfonso de Albuquerque. He and Tristan da Cunha were co-leading one of the colonial flotillas that the King of Portugal, from 1499 onwards, or rather, actually no, 1501 onwards, the King of Portugal was sending out an expedition every year. And if you just think about the geography of it, they had to do a very complicated sailing maneuver in the Atlantic Ocean in order to get the right winds, because they were totally reliant on wind power, to get around the southern coast of Africa, and then up into the Indian Ocean trading zone, which, as I said, they had Vasco da Gama was the first one to get in in 1498, 1499. And then in 1507, we had this expedition, it had left in 1506, and it came into the Indian Ocean trading zone, co-led by Tristan da Cunha and Alfonso de Albuquerque.

They went to Goa on the west coast of India, and then they split up, as I understand it, and Albuquerque went north and a little bit west from there. He went, first of all, to the island of Socotra, which is at the entrance, outside the entrance to the Red Sea, and then he worked his way along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Now, you have to understand that these Portuguese adventurers, you know, they were just like the Vikings, but better organized, better financed, and better armed, much better armed.

So, you know, they would turn up at any of the trading cities along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, they would try to force the local people to submit to their trading terms, or as Donald Trump would say, to capitulate. And if the local people refused, then they would just use their very advanced naval gunnery and blast the place apart until the local leader would capitulate. So they worked their way all along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, ending up in today's Oman.

And then they went up to this crucial place that had been the node of connection between the Mesopotamian civilizations and the civilizations of the Indian Ocean for so long, Hormuz, and they did their usual, Albuquerque did his usual thing and sent a message to the local vizier, like, you've got to submit, you've got to capitulate or else. And the vizier looked at Albuquerque, who had six rather down at heel ships. And, you know, there were scores of

much larger, much better looking, better established trading vessels in the port at Hormuz at the time.

And the vizier, the local guy said, local, you know, ruler, minister on behalf of the distant Persian Shah, said there's no way these six rather scrappy little ships can do any damage. But of course, what he didn't realize was that they had this advanced naval gunnery, and they just blew all the other ships out of the water and forced him to capitulate. And that was 1507 of the common era.

And then the Portuguese built ports all up the Gulf, maybe not all up, like two or three ports along the Gulf. And for the next 115 years, it was run by the Portuguese on a very exploitative basis. You know, they charged all kinds of port fees, they charged all the people who the captains of the boats that were coming to bring trade goods, they charged them for a certificate that was called the *cartaz*.

And, you know, everybody had to do what the Portuguese told them. You know, meantime, on the other side of Africa, by the way, the Portuguese were really throughout the 16th century, institutionalizing the transatlantic slave trade. That's what they were doing on the other side of Africa.

But here in the Indian Ocean, they didn't do so much slave trading, but they did really, really exploitative control of the trading mechanisms, not just in Hormuz and the Persian Gulf, but right across the Indian Ocean to the East Asian islands. And the main thing for them was the spice trade, because spices were much desired in Europe. You can put them on a boat, and they will last for a very long time.

And it's high value per kilogram of freight. They also brought in all kinds of wonderful things that were available only in East Asia and South Asia at the time, fine porcelain, silks, just really advanced manufacturers, because the people in Asia were far more technologically advanced at that time than the people in Europe.

Actually, when those early Portuguese adventurers went to Goa and Calicut and Hormuz and other places on the Indian coast, they would bring out their gifts, so-called gifts for the local rulers, who would turn up their noses and say, what garbage is this that you're bringing us from Portugal? I mean, this was like fourth-rate stuff.

So anyway, the Portuguese were running it for 115 years. I realize that I'm going on a little bit here, but I love this history. It's really important.

And then along came the East India Company based in London, a private corporation, for-profit corporation. I told you this whole business of imperial takings and imperial adventuring was joined at the hip to the development of capitalism and finance capitalism. Well, no better example than the East India Company, headquartered in London, or indeed, its counterpart, headquartered in Amsterdam, which in Dutch is called the East India Company, but for them, it's called the VOC.

So the English and the Dutch were also, you know, they saw what the Portuguese-- So in Portugal, it was done mainly by the royal household, by the monarchy, which organized everything, organized it quite nicely, but they didn't have the kind of the element of risk-

sharing and stockholding, shareholding, joint stock companies and everything. So what the Protestants of the northwest coast of Europe brought was the development of finance, capitalism, stock trading, and so on. And the English and Dutch, they really, throughout the 16th century, were very successful in nibbling away at the Portuguese position in the Indian Ocean.

Meantime, the Spanish were all over the Americas, because in 1493, the Pope had divided the world for all the Catholic powers, that is Spain and Portugal, essentially. [With the 1493 Treaty of Tordesillas.] But the Pope drew a dividing line and said, Spain gets, you know, everything west of this line, and Portugal gets everything east of the line. East of the line did include Brazil, so that's why Brazil is now today, by far the largest Portuguese speaking country in the world.

But the Protestant powers were not constrained by this. So they came and they really started eating away at the Portuguese supremacy in the Indian Ocean. And in 1622, of the Common Era, the London-based East India Company took over the port of Hormuz.

They seized it through because the East India Company had 200,000 troops that they deployed. I mean, this was the predatory nature of capitalism in all of the Global South, but to a T, because the idea that you have a private corporation that has 200,000 troops, I mean, Blackwater looks like a tiny little startup compared with the East India Company. And it wasn't until, I want to say sometime in the 19th century, that the London government finally decided to bail out the East India Company, which had lost a lot of money, and the London government kind of took it all over and it became, you know, Queen Victoria's Raj there in India.

But from 1622 onwards, Hormuz and a number of other ports in the Persian Gulf that had previously been Portuguese were run by the London-based East India Company. And so it was absolutely a part of the encroachment of the white supremacists into the Asian heartland from 1507 onwards. So now what do we see? Now we see the indigenous Persian people with good control over Hormuz.

I mean, I hope people are familiar with the topography of the region. But if you look at the Persian Gulf as a whole, basically all the northern coast of the Gulf and even the coast east of Hormuz has mountains and cliffs right there onto the ocean, onto the sea, whereas the south coast of the Gulf is just sort of plains and deserts. So it's much easier to defend, you know, coastal defense is much easier to defend the north coast of the Gulf and, you know, even outside of Hormuz than it is to defend the south coast.

That's one thing. Another is that obviously you've all seen pictures of the way that the finger of Musandam kind of goes up into the Strait of Hormuz. If you have a very large crude carrier and you're trying to take it through that channel, the channel is pretty narrow.

You know, there are two shipping channels, one going east, one going west. They're separated, obviously. Those crude carriers have to navigate very carefully because of the degree of curvature of the straight.

And it's not like you can rush them in or out. What rushes in or out along there are the fast ships that the Iranian Navy still has, and they are hidden in caves all along that north coast.

Iran is very resilient from many different perspectives. The population is very resilient underneath this horrendous, just terrible bombardment that they have received from the Israelis and from us—all of it, of course, funded and supported by U.S. taxpayers. But the population is resilient. Their governance system is resilient.

Their coastal defenses are resilient, and their missile forces are resilient. So that means they're not about to cave in. They're not about to capitulate.

My understanding—and of course, who knows what will happen between the time I record this message to you all and the time that you see it, which will be roughly 30 hours from now—maybe the Israelis and the U.S. will have launched another assault against Iran. And we know that's a possibility because the third aircraft carrier has just reached the region. Maybe nothing will happen.

Maybe it'll continue to be a standoff. I was really lucky earlier this week. I had a good conversation with Trita Parsi, who I'm sure you all know is a really wonderful expert on Iranian affairs, the author of many good books.

Trita is also the executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. And the Quincy Institute is a bipartisan think tank whose watchword is restraint. I mean, they want to restrain the push to world hegemony. And I hope even to pull it back, but we'll see.

We'll have to see whether the Iranians themselves are capable of withstanding the assaults that the Americans and Israelis have visited on them. Just briefly, I want to wrap up by noting that it's very significant that the mediation or brokering of a settlement in this current phase of this war is not being undertaken by the United Nations.

The United Nations is almost completely sidelined, playing no role whatsoever, except very technically in the IAEA, which is a UN body, when they might call in Rafael Grossi, I don't know. But it's not the UN and it's not the US. I mean, the US for how many years now? Well, okay, since the end of the Cold War has presented itself as the ultimate like peacemaker and Donald Trump likes to think of himself as a peacemaker. (Anyway, introducing a note of hilarity into the event here.) But no, it is an interesting player from the global south, Pakistan, which has very good relations, both with Donald Trump and with China. So I was talking actually just a few hours ago with a Pakistani specialist who was laying out in a lot of detail what a tightrope it is for the rulers of Pakistan to be able to play this role.

But from my perspective, as somebody who is a settler here in Washington, DC, in the land of the Piscataways, I think it's significant that White Supremacist International is already stepping back a little bit. And what can we do? What can all of us do to push that process of erosion of the white supremacist international forward as far as we can? I don't have any big answers. But I'm really glad that you folks out there in California are interested in trying to curb the power of our government in the international arena and to stop this goddamn war.

Thank you.