

They Can't Break Iran: The REAL Impact Of The War

Today I'm talking again to Dr. Christopher Mott. Chris is a scholar at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy and he is the author of the book "The Formless Empire: A Short History of Diplomacy and Warfare in Central Asia." Chris recently wrote two articles about why the 12-Day War and the joint US-Israeli attacks on Iran will increase the likelihood of Iran actually getting the bomb, not deter it. That's what we want to discuss today. Links: Formless Empire: <https://www.westholmepublishing.com/book/the-formless-empire-christopher-mott/> Article in the American Conservative: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-iran-strikes-will-further-encourage-nuclear-proliferation/> Neutrality Studies Goods Shop: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com>

#M3

That balance changes every time it faces a direct attack, whether it be a direct military attack from Israel or the United States, or an indirect attack, right? A diplomatic attack that says, "Oh, you know, at any moment they'll unleash a nuclear bomb on Tel Aviv," or whatever. Every time this happens, I feel like—I mean, obviously, I'm not inside the Iranian government, so I'm purely guessing here—but I imagine that it strengthens the hands of people who do want to double down on this program. I mean, it must strengthen their hand, right? Because they haven't done it yet, and yet their situation has gotten worse continuously. At some point, it's going to be: what is there left to lose?

#M2

Hello everybody, this is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking again to Dr. Christopher Mott. Chris is a scholar at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, and he's the author of the book The Formless Empire: A Short History of Diplomacy and Warfare in Central Asia. Chris recently also wrote two articles about why the 12-day war and the joint US-Israeli attacks on Iran will rather increase than decrease the likelihood of that state getting a nuclear bomb, and how the kind of regime that Iran has doesn't really matter when it comes to these affairs. That's what we want to discuss today. So, Chris, welcome back.

#M3

It's great to be back.

#M2

Well, you wrote two really good articles, and you make this very important point, because if we watch Western media, we think—or we are led to believe—that the main problem is that Iran is a theocracy and a centrally controlled authoritarian dictatorship. Now, you're saying, no, that doesn't really matter. Can you explain your point?

#M3

Yeah, so the thing is, we are always—in the West, anyway—we are so used to everyone talking about Iran as if it is merely a theocratic regime and nothing else. Not this thousands-of-years-old civilizational state that is a rare state, one that can claim a cultural continuity almost as long as China and India. Instead, it's treated like many of these kind of post-colonial, Sykes-Picot-type Arab states that are nearby. And I think it fundamentally underestimates the nature of Iranian patriotism in particular. Not to say that these same people don't also underestimate the patriotism of younger states, too, because there is always a rally-around-the-flag effect when someone is attacked, right?

And this is always, always discounted or diminished by so much of the kind of North Atlantic foreign policy adventurist community, right? Shall we say. But I think the effect is even stronger in a state like Iran. And this is probably, going forward, worth keeping in mind when people are talking about hawkish policies towards, oh, I don't know, China one day, maybe. But it's worth keeping in mind that this is a state that sees itself as completely separate from its government. I mean, maybe not its elite, of course—elites always view themselves as the state, if you will.

"I am the state," you know, famously. But in terms of actual people on the ground living day-to-day lives, Iran is one of the best examples you could have of people who are, both in the diaspora and inside the country, supporters of the government and opponents to it. Across the board, Iranians are not just patriotic, but very proud of their civilization. And this civilizational state, based around the Iranian plateau, has had strategic interests that go back as long as the various Iranian states have existed, right?

So you're looking at a middle power that wants to very much have not just its own internal sovereignty, but influence in its region. And this is going to clash with Israel, which I think everyone should acknowledge is a revisionist power—a very aggressive revisionist power in the region. This is going to inevitably clash with them regardless of the nature of the regime, right? If the regime change fanatics get what they want—like, all their dreams come true, exactly, you know, the thing that they've been promising that never comes true—what if this time it happens? What if there is a democratic, secular government in Iran?

Well, it's still going to be made up of people who were humiliated and embarrassed by an Israeli attack—a decapitation strike on the Iranian government that looks bad for them, and without being responded to, may invite more in the future. This new, mythical democratic Iranian regime is going to have a fixation on security. It's going to very much want to retain preponderance in its immediate

region, particularly over Iraq, which has traditionally been a place either dominated by the Iranian plateau or dominated by rivals of whatever state occupies the Iranian plateau. I mean, how much has Iraq been fought over between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire, between the Romans and the Sasanians or the Parthians?

I mean, like, on and on. This is like an eternal crux of Iranian foreign policy. It's kind of their immediate near abroad. And so that dynamic isn't going to go away, even if all these wonderful dreams that we are promised by the commentariat happen. It isn't going to—like, sure, for a couple of years you're going to have some upheaval, and they'll want to get rid of sanctions, and they'll reach out to people, they might realign the foreign policy, but in the end, you know, geography isn't going anywhere. The interests of that community, which is a relatively stable community, aren't going to go anywhere. And so in the end, whether it's five years, 10 years, 15 years down the line—I certainly wouldn't think much more than that.

You're going to see an Iran that is going to be one of these powers contesting for influence in the Middle East, regardless of the nature of the regime. And so that is going to prevent Israeli domination of the region one way or the other. Also, you know, Turkey is a part of this too—obviously, this is not a purely bipolar relationship by any means. So you're inevitably going to have to see—I think Israel has to integrate into the balance of power in the region, rather than be this perpetual kind of revisionist power, which is almost a politically correct way of saying a very aggressive state.

#M2

Yeah, but that's—I mean, that has been the strategy, the Israeli strategy, for at least the last—I mean, I would say since '68 or earlier—to be the dominant power, right? And to be the one that gets to control what happens in its near abroad. And it seems to me that Iran was planned to be something like a mega-Syria, right? A quick and sudden, you know, dash to the capital, decapitation, and then obviously regime change. And we could see how, in the U.S., the son of the former Shah was already getting ready, standing in front of the flags. And Twitter surprised me—he wants that one back. I mean, his father was literally regime-changed into power, regime-changing out the democratically elected Mossadegh. It's quite fascinating. But anyhow, that was the dream, right? Getting these people out and then probably establishing U.S. bases at the coastline of Iran—something like that must have gone through their mind. But you're saying, even if that was the case, that would still not solve the problem.

#M3

No, not at all. If they get the state failure option—which is the more likely option than a clean regime change, going by recent history anyway, although still not very likely, once again—for a variety of reasons, and because this is, I think, a more stable state overall. So if they get an Iranian state failure, they get a super Syria. Let's pretend for a moment that this happens. Once again,

Israel's not the only actor in the region. In a complete state collapse situation, Azerbaijan comes down south. And yes, Azerbaijan is very friendly with Israel, I know. But the more powerful they become, the less dependent they become on their other relationships.

Turkey, I would say, arguably benefits way more than Israel from this turn of events, because it has immediate border proximity to Iran, is a much larger, more populous state, and has, I would say, more diplomatic leverage over a wider variety of actors that would be involved in this process—whether it's Russia, China, or NATO. So, you know, Israel is also a very small country. Israel and Iran are not actually all that comparable. Israel is really carrying over its U.S. funding advantage and its technological edge, but those are the only edges it has.

In the long run, if anything, those advantages might go away, especially if the Iranian government turned into one that wasn't being sanctioned all the time and didn't have religious fatwas against, shall we say, certain kinds of weapons research. So I definitely see that, whether it's state failure or regime change or some hybrid of both—neither of which I see as the most likely scenario anyway—in no way does Israel become a regional hegemon. Even if they get every single thing they want, and they never have to worry about Iran for the next generation, that just brings forward the Turkey issue, right?

Already, Turkey and Israel are kind of meeting at Syria—they've kind of, shall we say, Molotov-Ribbentrop'd that country—and now they're kind of immediately touching, but Turkey immediately borders Iran in a way that Israel never could. And this is going to be, I think, honestly, you know, if they weaken Iran critically, they will not be the primary beneficiary. They will not gain the main benefit. And then Turkey and Israel are going to have a fallout with each other because Israel, once again, refuses to integrate into the region. So it's going to be a problem.

#M2

It is going to be a problem, but something we are now seeing, it seems to me, is that we are entering a stage in which the sanctity of borders is really only a remnant of international law, and we are seeing the redrawing of borders. I mean, we see it in Europe, we see it with what Russia is trying to achieve in Ukraine, we see it in the Balkans with what NATO just created with Kosovo, and now we see it in the Middle East, West Asia, where Israel—apparently, I read that Syria is now seriously—the new Syrian government, Mr. Jolani, is considering actually giving the Golan Heights to Israel.

It's like, okay, here, we recognize it as yours. And, you know, this redrawing—and of course, like Gaza and the West Bank—we can clearly see how these two entities are now being, you know, erased bit by bit, one much faster than the other. So the redrawing of the border seems to be going on. And I wonder whether this idea of splitting the region into even more small little factions is something that's going through U.S. policymakers' and Israeli minds. You know, if you can break up Iran into 15 successor states, well, that might solve the problem.

#M3

Well, one thing you definitely see in, I think, more of the maybe less mainstream—but not non-mainstream—commentary from both the U.S. and Israel is a lot of fixation on the Kurds, right? They really, really like the Kurdish issue. And from the U.S. perspective in particular, I find this very strange because—even, once again, take a best-case scenario—a free and independent Kurdistan would be carved out of so many different countries. It would be immediately hated and attacked by all of those countries. And unlike Israel, it would be landlocked, right? It would be a completely landlocked country in the Middle East that would be dependent on outside support. How is that remotely sustainable?

But from the Israeli perspective, I really do feel like the Kurdish issue is something they can always have to kind of throw out there as a, "We can totally turn this place into the Balkans if we have to." I'm not saying that they would be successful, but that is, I think, how it's viewed by their strategists—as this thing they could theoretically back to hold yet another weapon against their regional rivals. And then it would be presumably at least partly allied with them, right? And it would be, once again, a revisionist thing where we redraw the borders, and we have a new group, and this group is more friendly to Israel, and then everyone in the immediate area has to marshal their forces against this rather than against Israel.

So yeah, I would imagine that stuff like that is being thought of constantly—how you can use different minority communities. I mean, look at what's happened in Syria. The Druze in Syria—there's a big Druze population in Israel, and they tend to be, you know, pro-Israel. But the Druze in Syria were pro—not uniformly, but a lot of them were pro-Assad during the civil war, right? And now their position is so dire because the present government is basically turning on all of the minority groups, right? But now the Druze in Syria often are reaching out to Israel and being like, could you provide protection? So it opens up these opportunities just if there's chaos, regardless of whether it is ordered or structured or has a grand plan or not.

#M2

Yeah, that's why I don't think that a stable solution for West Asia is what's on the minds of these people. What's on their minds is how to instigate the next fault lines that others can then fight over, because divide and conquer. It's really, you know, relatively simple on a strategic level. But then the question arises: so what can be done against that, right? What can Iran do to prevent the region from fracturing even more? Because its actions might actually play into that playbook as well, right? By empowering certain groups and not...

#M3

Oh, I absolutely think the current government of Iran actually made a very—I understand the historical reasons for it—but I think they made a very big error by pinning so much on Palestinian

liberation, because Israel and Palestine are also very far from Iran, much like how Iran is far from Israel, right? And so when Iran projects power into Iraq, it's much more effective. But trying to do this stuff across Iraq and Syria and Lebanon becomes a fixation. And in this way, the current Iranian government, to me, very much resembles—in a weird mirror universe way—the current American government, because it is dominated by highly ideological baby boomer generation people who are very fixated on the inherited conflicts of their time. So for Iran, it's kind of 1979: the only way to break free of being a very, very junior partner, to put it politely, to the United States is to be aggressively anti-Israel.

Now, obviously, I just said that Iran, I think, in a world with a powerful Israel, is destined to be a rival with Israel. But I don't think that it necessarily makes sense, all this effort that they have put into Palestinian liberation. I don't think it has served them very well, frankly. And it's a recurring trap—they keep getting sucked into this. And then Israel can play up the whole "Iran is the greatest sponsor of terrorism" thing to justify what it does. Of course, that's a highly debatable claim, as anyone who's studied many of the other states of the region knows—including Israel itself, by the way, which we all know actually, on the fly, backed Hamas to divide it from the PLO before October 7th, and which we also know probably has had some unofficial ties with ISIS in the Syrian civil war.

Then we've got all the things that the various Gulf monarchy states have done with non-state actors. So, I mean, sure, does Iran back terrorist groups? Of course it does. But everyone in the region does. And that's kind of the game that they're all playing. So to me, this is a trap, right? This is a trap that Iran gets sucked into. It's a trap that everyone gets sucked into, and then it comes back to us in the North Atlantic world, where we hear, "Iran is the biggest threat to regional stability because of their ties with Hezbollah, because of whatever ties they have with the Houthis," etc., etc., etc. And it just ignores the context that everyone in that region is doing exactly the same thing.

#M2

I mean, at this point, it's a semantics game, right, for the general public. The semantics are that the United States and Israel have allies in the region, while Iran has proxies. And Iran funds terrorists, while the US and Israel support rebels, they support liberation movements, right? It's pure semantics, but it is the same dynamic happening—basically a form of alliance building, right? With the strong powers and then the smaller ones going down and just having these different ways of funneling weapons to them. So, in a sense, one of the problems is that de-escalation in terms of alliance building isn't happening. Alliance building now will keep continuing. And we just saw one side that has lost a couple of its allies, whereas the other one still has them or even has more now.

#M3

I strongly suspect that one of the reasons this kind of unnecessary Israeli decapitation strike occurred is because they feel that this is their chance, right? The timetables work: Hezbollah is knocked out, at least temporarily; the Palestinians are on the back foot, to put it mildly; Syria is out

of the game. I think Syria was the critical lynchpin, in a way, of kind of keeping Israel in check or at least more focused on its near abroad. Now is the time they do it, right? If we've got two out of three, or three out of four, of our opponents really knocked down, maybe we can get the last one, too. Maybe this is the time to go.

And so there is an incentive for many people in the Israeli government to actively sabotage diplomacy right now, because they might not get as good of a deal later—whether that be because Iran's position is strengthened, or because the U.S. has a less militarized perspective on the matter in the future, which could just be demographic, too. I mean, it's increasingly apparent that everyone in the U.S. under a certain age—well, not everyone, but you know what I mean, proportionally speaking—like, Israeli support, which was extremely popular with the older generations, to put it mildly, across the ideological spectrum, is now almost the inverse, right?

If you look at anyone under 50 years old, there are overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards Israel, once again across the ideological spectrum. And we all know who pays the most, of any foreign supporters, to Israel and its military: it's the U.S. So I think they're thinking a lot of things are now on a ticking clock, right? So this is the chance. If you're really going to hit their big foe, if you're really going to send a message across the region, now is the time to go after Iran.

#M2

Now, this failed. I mean, this strategy hit a brick wall a little bit, like how the United States' strategy with Afghanistan at some point just hit a brick wall—you just couldn't use all of that. Even with all the military power, you cannot overcome that final wall. So what does this, in your view, do now? Because you also wrote about this constant... this constant question of nuclear weapons.

And although Iran has a fatwa against these weapons, I also believe that this episode was a very, very clear indication that, you know, nuclear weapons might just be the only thing that saves you at the end of the day, because diplomacy doesn't. Even the NPT doesn't. The West is now officially saying, including Europe, "We don't care about the NPT. We don't give a damn. Anything that's written in there—if we disagree with it, then you cannot have it." And so, with Article 2 of the UN Charter, it's now, you know, in black and white. It's like the dirty work. So what message does this send to states who actually look at this realistically?

#M3

I mean, I've been thinking about this ever since the fall of Qaddafi, honestly, because Qaddafi saw what happened to Iraq. Iraq didn't actually have much in the way of... They had originally a weapons of mass destruction program, but they didn't keep it going. And it was because they didn't keep it going that perhaps they were so easy to take out as a government—even ignoring all the rest that came after, which wasn't very easy, but you know what I mean. Qaddafi saw that as his diplomatic opening to the West, right? He could say, "I'm ending the Libyan weapons of mass

destruction program," and in so doing, you know, lift your sanctions on me, restore me to diplomatic normalcy, et cetera.

And, you know, for a couple of years that worked. But then a bunch of NATO countries decided that they wanted to get rid of him when the opportunity arose during the Arab Spring. And they did. And ever since that point, I've been thinking—and I know I'm not the only one—why would you ever give up your weapons of mass destruction? Especially because that was happening at the same time that North Korea was clearly not being attacked or invaded. Now, there are other reasons for that. You know, North Korea has a kind of defensive alliance with China. No one's going to take on China. No one wants to fight a land war with a very large army on the Korean Peninsula. But once again, that's also a deterrence factor, right?

North Korea had the strongest military of these so-called rogue states. But I would also argue that North Korea's nuclear weapons program isn't just a protection from the United States. I think it gives them a little bit more leverage with their nearby friends, Russia and China. Not that it's going to nuke them or anything, but you know what I mean. It's not a vassal state—it really isn't. And you have seen a much more independent line in North Korean foreign policy, I would say, in the past 10 or 15 years, particularly vis-à-vis China. So I think that people look at that and they look at Libya, and they're right to ask some questions. Now, does this mean that nuclear proliferation is good? Probably not.

I think that in a world where the Middle East, especially, did not have any nuclear weapons, that would be great and we should keep it that way. But the problem that is so often overlooked, of course, is that there is a state in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons, even if not officially, right? And that state is Israel. It also happens to be a revisionist power state. Maybe one of the reasons that it is a revisionist power is because it has a nuclear deterrent on the defense, which enables it to fully unleash its offensive capabilities. So while it would be ideal to not have nukes in the Middle East, I don't see the Israelis giving them up anytime soon. It's very destabilizing to have one power, especially a very aggressive power, who has them and no one else has them.

In a way, it's fair to ask the question: is that worse than if other powers in the region also had a nuclear deterrent and they had to come to a détente with each other? Now, obviously, there are always concerns with this type of situation, especially when you're dealing with a theocratic regime. I understand that, but you cannot fault the strategic logic. It's becoming more and more apparent that if you are threatened by a large superpower—if you're on their list, whether it's for regime change or to be turned into another Syria or whatever—then you really need to consider every option to defend yourself, because no government can govern if it lives in fear of collapsing due to foreign pressure at any point.

I mean, no matter how popular or whatever government is, it will not be taken seriously by its people if it does not provide security against external attack. And so I think just seeing the blatant hypocrisy on the issue of weapons of mass destruction from the community that is supposed to

police and regulate it—it's inevitable, not only that Iran would keep looking at this, unless it's part of a greater deal that secures their sovereignty and independence from Israel. They're under a lot of pressure right now. That could happen. But forget Iran for a second. Other countries are going to look at this too, whether or not Iran continues the bomb program. And right now, if I had to put my money down on it, I would say they will—especially as it looks like there wasn't quite as much damage done to the program as many people are saying.

But even if they don't—even if they view this as a diplomatic off-ramp to have more normal relations, which would be great, at least in the short term from my perspective—other countries are going to say, "Well, I don't want that to happen to me. Just look at that decapitation strike. Who would ever... you would want to build up as many deterrents as possible to prevent something like that from happening to you." I've seen people compare this to Pearl Harbor, but this isn't at all like Pearl Harbor. This would be like if somehow the Japanese Navy had seized the Panama Canal and then been able to launch aircraft carrier attacks on Washington, D.C., and kill a bunch of people in the White House.

The degree to which this huge attack—which, by the way, will definitely poison Iranian feelings towards Israel, no matter, once again, what government they have—just other countries seeing this, they have to be thinking, "We need to proof ourselves against this kind of, like, whatever it was, whether it's regime change or just chaos sowing. We have to hunker down." And so I think more countries in the world will seriously look at weapons of mass destruction when they are faced with this kind of alternative, because if they don't have the technological advantages or the size advantages of the countries that are targeting them, then they have to equalize the playing field somehow. And so it will inevitably be a part of the future security dialogue.

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Now, the interesting thing, of course, is that this is a rational, Western IR realism way of looking at this. And I do agree with it—that's what logically follows from these actions. The interesting thing is that the one thing that keeps Iran from actually having a nuclear weapons program is their religious beliefs. The religious beliefs that, in the general public, are depicted as this archaic, slaughter-inducing barbarism are the very thing that inspired Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a fatwa against these weapons of mass destruction, because they're not compatible with Islam. Can you speak to that a little bit? What's the chance, or the likelihood, that this theological argument against nuclear weapons might go away?

#M3

Well, that's the question right now, isn't it? I would be lying if I said I know what it means for the present government, but I think that every single time their sovereignty is threatened, it's going to inevitably push more and more people in the IRGC towards weaponization of the nuclear program, just as a defensive measure. But the one thing—and this was, the nuclear point was the central

piece of my argument with The American Conservative, but here I can link that to the piece I wrote for UnHerd about more of the Iranian internal politics element—I think that younger Iranians generally have a pretty low opinion of the government, right? And I also think that there is a strong turn away from the overt religiousness of the government too.

I think Westerners are incorrect to view this as the Iranian people wanting to be Western. I think that's a very common and narcissistic delusion that many North Atlantic liberals have about other countries, right? But I do think that a lot of them want change. And I also think I wouldn't be surprised if younger people in the security establishment secretly feel the same. So what you could get is a much-vaunted regime change that clears the field for a nuclear Iran, in a way, because you have a much more secular government that says this stupid fatwa stuff is the reason that Israel could kick us around. And, you know, we're going to put our interests ahead of arcane theological concerns.

And we are going to be a nuclear power in the future. Maybe not immediately, but we're going to look into it because, like, why should we have a fatwa that weakens us? Right? We want to be a strong and national government. And we were held back by these Islamists who put Arab concerns first, rather than, you know, true Iran, which predates Islam, etc. This is a very feasible way that this could all go down, right? And therefore, the Western best-case scenario actually is the one that is most likely to lead to an Iran that actually has some kind of extra deterrent that it might not have now, whether it's nuclear or chemical or what have you.

#M2

Let's not forget the strikes that Iran executed on the decapitation front. They took out all of the older generation, actually. They took out the very people who were still embedded in that kind of thinking. What kind of newer and younger interpretations of security are now bubbling up or are already in power still remains to be seen. But maybe let me ask you about your assessment of the role of the IAEA, because right now, today, we read in the newspaper that Mr. Grossi now says, "Okay, Iran is probably just months away from actually being back to where it was." And to me, the IAEA was supposed to be a watchdog and a factor of stability, but to me, it looks very much to the contrary. I mean, the United States managed to co-opt quite a lot and have them say what they needed to hear. What's your interpretation?

#M3

Yeah, I rather struggle to read that one. I'm not sure that I could offer anything that you haven't said yourself. I would just say that the one thing that always comes to mind when this issue comes up, whether it's from the IAEA or even just the media talking about it in general, is that we have been told that Iran is on the precipice of a nuclear weapon for, I don't know, 30 years now. And this is either the world's longest precipice, or they have been intentionally holding back, right?

And in either of those circumstances, they're either further away than we think and everyone's ginning this up as an excuse to be hawkish towards Iran, or they have been on the precipice and have just intentionally not gone there because they haven't felt the need to yet, right? So the threat of it happening might be more diplomatically useful than the reality. That balance changes every time Iran faces a direct attack, right? So every single time, whether it be a direct military attack from Israel or the United States, or an indirect attack, right?

A diplomatic attack that says, "Oh, you know, at any moment they'll unleash a nuclear bomb on Tel Aviv," or whatever—every time this happens, I feel like—I mean, obviously I'm not inside the Iranian government, so I'm purely guessing here—but I imagine that it strengthens the hands of people who do want to double down on this program. I mean, it must strengthen their hand, right? Because they haven't done it yet, and yet their situation has gotten worse continuously. At some point, it's going to be, "What is there left to lose?" But specifically when it comes to the IAEA, I have no idea. It's just hard to take it seriously right now. I mean, the double standards are part of all of this, right? It's how they analyze the situation in Iran versus other countries. Everyone sees it.

#M2

Yeah, but, you know, this is so frustrating because the IAEA, just like the OPCW when it comes to Syria, is supposed to have an outside inspection function in order to reassure everybody of what's going on. And that in and of itself is a good idea. It's an idea to create stability. But we see in both cases how Western powers were able to support these institutions and then use them to justify their aggression, even against better knowledge. It begs the question: how do we change that? Because, you know, the IAEA is based in Austria because Austria is neutral, and the IAEA is supposed to be a secondary beneficiary of that, just like the Red Cross is of Swiss neutrality, to be an arbiter. But they don't work as such. What would be the right way of re-initializing that kind of supervision idea in this multipolar world? That's a really good question.

#M3

I'm not sure that I have an answer to that. I do think that before you get to the obvious constructive side—we would... I'm glad you brought up Syria and the OPCW, by the way, because I think there first needs to be a serious reckoning with past things that have happened, and also what the impacts of those things are, right? Because anyone who was paying attention to the Syrian civil war knew that all sides had access to weapons of mass destruction. And yet, the way it was talked about was that only one side had them or was using them. And yet, once Obama did his famous red line speech, we all know who had the most incentive to have a chemical weapons attack to therefore trigger outside involvement, right?

These are the kinds of things that need to have an honest reckoning. And if we're going to have any kind of pretense of a neutral, overseeing force when it comes to nuclear power, it's got to be aware of the fact that state failure, first of all, is really, really bad for this. Right? The more actors you have

to deal with, the worse this problem becomes. So, like, a failed state—Iran is going to have a nuclear version of the chemical weapons issue in Syria, where there's going to be a bunch of different people who potentially have access to who knows what kind of material, and then who knows how they're going to use it to get various outside actors on their side in some kind of internal dispute. Right?

So, obviously, any kind of outside organization wants to deal with a stable state that is functional. This is impossible when the state is being constantly undermined by outside actors. How you deal with that—I mean, I don't know how the organizations themselves deal with it—but it is an argument for the diplomatic corps throughout the region to seek peace and stability first, rather than an end to nuclear programs first, right? You would absolutely want to have some kind of diplomatic accord and then have a hopefully neutral arbiter of what everyone's program is. Because if you try to do this first—which is the problem with how the US and Israel are approaching this issue, right?—they want the nuclear deal before anything else.

And to me, that's, like, completely ass-backwards, right? Because you absolutely want to have stability and not the threat of a ceasefire breaking down at any moment, or someone's Truth Social posts changing diplomacy, or what have you. You want some degree of stability, with diplomats in each other's countries talking, and then once you have this level of normality, you can get to the kind of non-state actors who are looking at people's programs. And of course, there would have to be some level of reciprocity here, right? If you're going to have people inspecting an Iranian nuclear program, it's only fair—I mean, we know what the answer will be—but it's only fair to ask that maybe they look at the Israeli one, too.

#M2

Israel has constantly said, like, no, and they've constantly said, "We don't have this thing." But it's also clear that they do possess them. And the one thing, again, where we must congratulate Iran, I believe, is that Iran didn't actually try to hit the desert in Israel where they have their heavy water—the Negev plant, where they have their heavy water reactors. They didn't do that. They didn't attack the nuclear site or the other one. Probably also because they know that might trigger the use of nuclear weapons against them. So what we have now is a situation in which two nuclear weapon states take the liberty of attacking the civilian nuclear program of a non-nuclear weapon state, which is so illegal on so many levels. But this is now the new reality, the new normal, right? That this is acceptable. Because to my knowledge, I don't even know if the IAEA condemned it or not. And probably they had to condemn it, but I'm not aware of that.

#M3

I don't know either, actually. That would be useful to find out.

#M2

But I don't know. Yeah, because they also played the same role in Ukraine and Russia, right? When Ukraine was shelling the power plant that the Russians held on Ukrainian territory. And the IAEA to this day says, "We don't know where the shells came from. Both sides are accusing the other one." It's like the dumbest thing in the world—the idea that the Russians keep shelling the power plant that they themselves hold. But anyhow, that's the world we live in. So yeah, it really boils down to raw ability—the ability to have such a program or not.

#M3

Yeah, I mean, I think even if nukes are used—obviously, they haven't been used in an active, non-testing way since when they were first used—the mere threat of their existence gives this innate advantage to the country that has them, even if the war is entirely conventional. So this 12-day war, which might be under a very temporary ceasefire right now for all we know—so it might be more than that—so far, everything was entirely conventional, but it clearly impacted Iran's choices about what they could attack and what they couldn't attack, and gave them constraints that Israel doesn't have. And once again, this is telling not just Iran but the world: you will operate at a disadvantage, even if you're not threatening to up the DEFCON level or whatever. It's just an inherent, background disadvantage that you'll be operating from if things ever get really bad with a nuclear power. There's an obvious reason why, once India got nuclear weapons, Pakistan immediately had to fixate on getting nuclear weapons. It was, as the underdog especially, it felt that its very survival was at stake.

So it's hard to criticize. I mean, yeah, I'm not a fan of nuclear proliferation, but it's really, really hard to criticize people just not wanting to lose out, right? Like, oh, you can be proud of the fact that, hey, we didn't submit, you know, we didn't submit and we didn't get nukes—look at us. But everyone sees that you are operating at a disadvantage, including, I imagine, a lot of domestic criticism, too. So the worse relations are diplomatically, the more it just pushes, I think, everyone in this direction in the long run. So, you know...

#M2

Do you think that there's any kind of equivalent to a nuclear weapon? Because we have seen how successful Iran was with its missile program and how they have really, really powerful missiles. And again, if one of those was directed against, say, the Negev Desert power plant, I mean, that might cause just as much harm and destruction and pollution—right?—beyond imagination. It's something we don't want to see. But there are certain threats that could be thought of as similar to having a nuclear weapon. Do you see any of those? Or are nuclear weapons still this one thing that nobody can match in terms of what they potentially can do on the battlefield?

#M3

Well, so far, they seem to be unmatched, but it wouldn't surprise me if people get more and more interested in looking at something that isn't a nuclear weapon but still provides a huge amount of deterrence. So, that could be—I don't know—that could be a form of chemical weapon, right? The one thing I don't see is biological weapons, because those cannot be controlled, right? You unleash that and it can go anywhere, everywhere, potentially—including back to yourself. You have no control over it whatsoever. So that's probably a dead end, I imagine. But certain forms of chemical weapons, I imagine, in the future could be engineered to be incredibly deadly, but also region-specific. You have certain—not saying this is a WMD yet—but it could be the basis of one.

You have stuff like, in Russia, the fuel-air bomb, right? Where it uses a vacuum—it's like a vacuum bomb—and it causes immense material destruction over a very large landmass, but it doesn't create radioactive fallout or anything like that. It's basically just a big fireball that then creates a big suction air pocket. So there's—I mean, I'm no engineer—but there are probably alternatives that people could look at and say, "This could be a deterrent without going nuclear." It just needs more technological investment and creative thinking and engineering know-how, which I definitely don't have. So, you know, don't ask me—I'm just being hypothetical here. But it wouldn't surprise me if people looked at it that way. But so far, I don't think anything quite trumps the nuclear card.

And even if it did, because it was used in a major war, its effects are very demonstrable. I think it will always have a bit more of a diplomatic impact, a bit more weight to it, until, you know, it's surpassed perhaps by something else. But for right now, it seems to be the ultimate thing that people fixate on. But you have a very valid point here, which is that people might be looking for conventional, shall we say, alternatives for deterrence that might be different and might be easier to kind of sneak by with and then be like, oh, it's an added shell of the tortoise, right? It's harder to puncture our sovereignty because we have this form of deterrence, whatever it might be. That might be a wise thing to do, because it also avoids the scrutiny, if you will, of nuclear weapons, which immediately draw everyone's attention to your country's defense program.

#M2

Yeah, and that's not to say that we wish that to happen. This is just one of the logical outcomes of what we have seen now. Because we are seeing the collapse of a lot of these structures, including the NPT, right? All of these mechanisms that we tried to create in order to constrain weaponization and in order to constrain destructive capability. But these are going away, and they're being torn down in real time by, in my view, mainly the Western countries. So that leaves us with proliferation in the nuclear realm and proliferation in conventional weapons building, unfortunately.

#M3

It's not just that, too. I mean, we've been focused on Iran because it's the center of the news. And that's kind of what, you know, my two pieces—I was thinking about that when I was writing them.

We've been focusing on the states that are, shall we say, on the NATO hit list. But these concerns actually apply to other countries, too. You can see countries that border Russia—they don't want to be the next Ukraine—thinking about what extra deterrence they could have. Something else I could see is, well, Taiwan, right?

Think about that, right? Some kind of stealth deterrence program, whatever it might be, to offset China's obviously massive conventional superiority. So this isn't just a rogue state discussion at all. This is very much a discussion about how to deal with a multipolar future and the kind of unpredictable security dilemma problems that are going to come out of it. And that could apply to Taiwan. That could apply to Poland. It's not just going to be these countries that are officially considered "bad guy" countries, if you will.

#M2

Yeah, this is why this entire 12-day campaign, or whatever it was, in Iran has ramifications far beyond Iran and Central Asia. I would say it has even greater ramifications than the Russo-Ukrainian war in terms of what kind of discussions it will set off in other states, because this one will set off a lot, also in the Global South. Oh yeah, big time. Well, it's not a very happy discussion, but I am happy to have it with you, Christoph. Chris, for people who want to read more from you, where should they go?

#M3

Institute for Peace and Diplomacy for a lot of my professional work. And I have a personal site called GeoTrickster for the less professional stuff.

#M2

I will try to put the links in the description below. Dr. Christopher Mott, thank you very much for your time today.

#M3

Thank you, Pascal.