

America is powering the UK's preparations for war - it is they that need to be deterred, not Iran

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It's about time we wised up to what is going on in this utterly farcical "crisis" in the Gulf, this charade of lies and pomposity which Trump and his doggies in London are presenting to us.



Trump, an American president who is a racist, misogynist, dishonest and psychologically disturbed man - assisted by two vicious and equally dishonourable and delusional advisers - is threatening to go to war with Iran while a kipper-waving and equally serial-lying buffoon, who is probably the future British prime minister, prefers to concentrate on the self-destruction of his country rather than the hijacking of his ships.

The Iranians, ever the scheming Shia "terrorists" of the Gulf, have dared to give two fingers to the crackpot president who ratted on his country's international nuclear agreement with Iran, and now play motor-boats in the Strait of Hormuz to remind both Trump and Johnson - and poor wee Jeremy Hunt - that the Middle East is the graveyard of empires both real and long dead. What mischief! What brazen terroristic crimes will the Persians be up to next?

And we take all this garbage seriously? Perhaps we must blame ourselves. Our commentators and our correspondents, our mighty media empires, gleefully take down the sleazy characters in Washington and London and then - the moment they sniff war - their faces freeze in righteous and patriotic lockjaw as they speak disingenuously of Trump's "Mid-East policy", his "Gulf policy", his close friendship with his blood-boltered Saudi "ally" or his land-grabbing Israeli ally. What tosh. There is no Trump policy on anything. Nor is there a Boris Johnson policy, nor a Jeremy Hunt policy - save, perhaps, a plaintive Gilbert and Sullivan bleat about Iran's "totally and utterly unacceptable" behaviour in nicking the Stena Impero.

"Impero" was the right word. Indeed, there was nothing sadder or more pitiful than the sound of the commander of HMS Montrose - or "Foxtrot 236" as the Iranians addressed him by the frigate's bow number - reading his Victorian rulebook to the Revolutionary Guards on Friday. "You must not impair, impede, obstruct or hamper the passage of the MV Stena Impero," he quoted. Oh but the

Iranians could and did impair, impede, obstruct and hamper the passage of the British-flagged tanker.

For they knew that the only British naval vessel swanning around in the entire 251,000sq m of sea which is the Arabian Gulf - or the Persian Gulf, take your pick - was a 436ft-long frigate far too far away to prevent such "impairment" and "obstruction". Long gone are the days when 15-year-old Horatio Nelson imperiously sailed the Gulf up to Basra in the 18th-century 20-gun frigate Seahorse under the captaincy of his uncle Maurice Suckling. If HMS Duncan, named after the 18th-century victor of the Battle of Camperdown, comes to the relief of HMS Montrose, named after the 18th-century duke, they can only spend a few weeks together. Then Montrose will head home.

In Nelson's day, the royal navy possessed more than 600 warships. Today, we have fewer than 20 to stop the Persian hordes - or Chinese hordes or any other hordes - from impairing, impeding, obstructing and hampering what we like to call "our vital oil supplies". It was somehow fitting that the kidnapped tanker was running empty on its way to the dictatorial kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Trump's loveable ally, when it was hijacked. No wonder Jeremy Hunt wants to cool the waters of the Gulf rather than order his tiny ship to play escort with America's mighty fleet.

Yet, it was truly fitting that on the cusp of a new era of British self-delusion and imperial mysticism, the Brits should have embarked on the Monty Pythonesque seizure of the Iranian tanker at Gibraltar. We were given to understand - and here the blanket of bombast was richly embroidered - that the Grace 1, boarded as elegantly by the royal marines as their masked Iranian opposite numbers were to rappel onto the Stena Impero, was seized because she was carrying oil to Syria. The EU, supposedly all too keen to exercise such sanctions, said nothing. And then Jeremy wanted to chat to the Iranians, to receive assurances that their tanker was not headed to Baniyas but - who knows? - to the Greek Islands, perhaps, or the Costa del Sol.

So, just to complete the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, the matter was handed over to the chief justice of the Gibraltar Supreme Court whose political jurisdiction - we are now supposed to believe - embraces great affairs of state from Washington and London to Tehran, even though the rock's population is less than 35,000 souls. Oh but yes, we are told, the Gibraltar Supreme Court has ordered the Grace 1's detention for another 30 days. Well, well, we must do what this almighty judiciary wishes. Truly, this is only one step away from Trial By Jury, the comic opera which our probable future prime minister must surely adore.

Had the Americans not - as increasingly appears to be the case - urged, told or instructed the British to grab the Grace 1, be sure they would not have done so. And be sure that if Jeremy had declined to involve himself in this nonsense any longer, the Gibraltar Supreme Court and its chief justice and its three other judges would have forgotten their legal mumbo jumbo, graced the Iranian captain with their favour and wished him God's speed. But no. The moment we got involved in this incendiary action, it was utterly inevitable that the Iranians would do the same. As I've often reflected, those Persian chaps understand us much better than we understand them.

Come with me for a moment, then, to Tehran. Do we really think that the Iranians - haughty, vain, cruel and vindictive though they can be - are not aware of Britain's imminent Brexit self-immolation? Do we imagine for a moment that they have not grasped the intricacies of the Johnson-Hunt battle, its outcome decided by a cabal of Tories whose decisions make Iran's parliamentary and presidential elections look like a model of international democracy? Be sure the Iranians noted Boris Johnson's kipper. But they have bigger fish to fry in the Gulf.

And do we seriously believe that the Iranians have forgotten the last "tanker war" in the Gulf in

1987? I remember it very well. I reported the whole wretched affair, literally flying over the steaming Gulf on helicopters, day after day. The climax came when the Americans decided to flag Kuwaiti tankers with the Stars and Stripes and give them a US naval escort to protect them from Iranian air attacks. Today, it sounds familiar. We were, at the time of course, allied with that fine and democratic Arab warrior Saddam Hussein who had invaded Iran in 1980 (at an ultimate cost of more than a million lives). Well, the very first escort mission went disastrously wrong – although Trump, Hunt and Boris Johnson and Humpty Dumpty have forgotten all this – when the Kuwaiti tanker al-Rakkah, now nominally blessed as the US tanker Bridgeton and accompanied by a clutch of US naval vessels, hit an Iranian mine on 24 July 1987.

It was able to continue its voyage, but the literally thin-skinned American warships – whose sides were so fragile that a mine could have sunk them – spent the rest of the journey in line astern behind the Bridgeton like a gaggle of chicks, using the vast carrier's bulk to protect themselves. The Iranians, as I say, will not have forgotten this American humiliation. They are, after all, specialists in humiliation when they believe they have been humiliated.

But do we think that Trump's ridiculous "Gulf Protection Force" would fare any better? There are few volunteers, but since Boris Johnson was prepared to sink a British ambassador, I suppose he might as well risk a British frigate or two.

The Iranians, again, will have worked all this out. Their nuclear treaty, honourably signed with the American president of the time, has been torn up, eviscerated and most shamefully destroyed by Trump. So after being ratted on by the Americans, and force-fed more sanctions by the culprit, why shouldn't the Iranians play a few super-power games of their own, using Her Britannic Majesty's innocent vessels on their play station? We still haven't grasped the true import – but again, be sure the Iranians have – of Trump's outrage at Sir Kim Darroch's diplomatic reporting on the US destruction of the nuclear deal. Trump's anger was clearly intended to defenestrate the British ambassador. He was saying "send him back" – as surely as he wanted to send a US congresswoman "back" for being rude to him. And our probable future prime minister actually went along with it.

Yet amid this chicanery, we are still supposed to spoon up the gruel that our imperial messengers write for us, pretending yet again that there is a Trump policy in the Gulf, that Middle East sanity can emerge from the inhabitants of a mental institution. Hence David Ignatius, an old colleague of mine and a friend in the days of Lebanon's civil war, is now writing the following codswallop in his US column: "As the United States' confrontation with Iran deepens in the Persian Gulf ... the grim but necessary task is to deter Iran and prepare for war, if deterrence fails."

To do this, Mohammed bin Salman, according to the aforesaid Ignatius, must take responsibility for the butchery of Jamal Kashoggi and close down the criminal Yemen war – as if the crown prince would contemplate the second, let alone the first – because "the US-Saudi relationship is important for both countries' security – especially as the confrontation with Tehran edges closer to war ... resetting the US-Saudi relationship on a more honest basis is urgent now, as the danger of regional conflict grows."

So forget the fact that Trump is a lunatic and that the crown prince appears to be a deeply disturbed young man and runs a psychotic state. The White House is a mad house, but according to Ignatius we must prepare for "the grim but necessary task" of "detering Iran" – rather than deterring Trump – as "the danger of regional conflict grows". How can we go on taking this twaddle? Is there not a switch-off button to allow us the silence of reflection – at least a few moments to contemplate that insanity is powering our preparations for war?

It might be a good idea, right now, to remember what it's like to patrol the Gulf off the Iranian coastline. Just over 30 years ago, I was aboard one of the Montrose's older sister ships, the frigate HMS Broadsword, as it escorted British tankers through the Strait of Hormuz and under the gaze of the Revolutionary Guards. To give readers a touch of reality - real reality, so to speak - this is what I wrote at the time:

"What afflicted most of the seamen in the Gulf was the heat. It burnt the entire decks until they were, quite literally, too hot to walk on. British sailors stood on the edges of their shoes because of the scalding temperatures emerging from the steel. The depth-charge casings, the Bofors gun-aiming device, were too hot to touch. On the helicopter flight deck, the heat rose to 135 degrees, and only a thoughtless leading hand would have touched a spanner without putting his gloves on. It created a dull head, a desperate weariness, an awesome irritation with one's fellow humans on the foredeck. Inside the ship ... the heat shuffled through the vessel faster than the seamen. The officer's mess was a cool 80 degrees. One glass of water and I was dripping. Open the first watertight door and I was ambushed by the heat ... After the second door, I walked into a tropical smelter, the familiar grey monochrome sea sloshing below the deck. How can men work in this and remain rational?"

Yes, I guess "reason" is what it's all about, but our masters no longer possess this faculty. 'Broadsword' was sold off to the Brazilians, by the way, almost a quarter of a century ago, in 1995. The 'Bridgeton' was scrapped in India seven years later. And that's where our crazed leaders belong today: in the breakers' yard.

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