

The Fast Track to Armageddon

by Louis René Beres



“Should the enemy make a mistake, our roaring missiles will rain down on them.” – IRGC Iran Air Force Commander, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Feb. 4, 2017

When all pertinent factors are taken into account, U.S. President Donald Trump could sometime undertake more-or-less selective military action against Iran. In response, the Islamic Republic – then having absolutely no meaningful option to launching at least certain forms of armed reprisal – would target American military forces in the region and/or carefully chosen Israeli targets. Whatever its precise configuration of selected targets, Tehran’s retaliatory blow would be expressly designed so as not to elicit an unacceptably massive (possibly even nuclear) counter-retaliation. With particular regard to Israel, moreover, this sort of retaliation would plausibly include, inter alia, a substantial reliance upon Iran’s own surrogate militia forces in Hezbollah.

All such bewildering calculations, of course, must assume perfect rationality on all sides. If, for example, the new American president should cast all caution to the winds with his own first strike (a strike that would be defended by Washington, in law, as an allegedly legitimate expression of international law-enforcement, or “anticipatory self-defense”), the Iranian response, whether rational or irrational, could expectedly be “proportionate” – that is, comparably massive. In that prospectively escalatory case, any contemplated introduction of nuclear weapons into the ensuing conflagration might not necessarily be dismissed out of hand.

At that point, moreover, any such introduction would have to originate from the American and/or Israeli side. This indisputable inference is “true by definition,” “simply” because Iran would not yet have become an operationally nuclear power. In such circumstances, Trump, especially in view of his favored argumentum ad baculum stance in virtually all matters, might decide upon a so-called “mad dog” strategy vis-a-vis Iran. Here, the American president would display a last-resort dependence upon a strategy of pretended irrationality, or what I have called in my own latest books and monographs, the “rationality of pretended irrationality.”

Significantly, any such residual reliance, while intuitively sensible and apparently compelling, could still backfire, thereby opening up an “Armageddon path” to a now unstoppable escalation.

If, on the other hand, Trump’s “punishing” or defensive initial strike against Iran were conspicuously less than massive, a fully rational Iranian adversary would likely ensure that its chosen reprisal was correspondingly “limited.” But if Trump’s consciously rational and calibrated attack upon Iran were wittingly or unwittingly launched against an irrational enemy leadership, the Iranian response could then be “roaring missiles,” or an all-out retaliation. This presumably unanticipated response, while non-nuclear, could be

directed at some as yet undeterminable combination of U.S. and Israeli targets. Cumulatively, it could still inflict very substantial harms.

For the moment, at least, any Iranian missile reprisal against U.S. interests and personnel would have to exclude the American homeland. This same limiting prediction, however, cannot be made in reference to any considered Israeli targets. On the contrary, any reciprocal Iranian attack directed against Israel would plausibly target that country's military assets and could also include a significant number of "soft" civilian populations and corollary infrastructures.

Even if it is being played only by rational adversaries, the advancing strategic "game" would demand that each contestant relentlessly strive for "escalation dominance." Ominously, it is in the thoroughly unpracticed internal dynamics of any such rivalry that the serious prospect of a genuinely "Armageddon" scenario could sometime be realized. This intolerable outcome could be produced either in unexpected increments of escalation by any or all of the three dominant national players, or instead, by any sudden quantum leap in destructiveness undertaken by Iran, Israel and/or the United States.

The only thing that is wholly predictable in usefully deciphering such complex dynamics is that they are all unpredictable. For example, even under the best or optimum assumptions of enemy rationality, all pertinent decision-makers would have to concern themselves with miscalculations, errors in information, unauthorized uses of strategic weapons, mechanical or computer malfunctions, poorly recognized instances of cyberdefense, cyber-war and even adversarial coups d'états.

In the final analysis, informed citizens and participants in these hideously complicated games of strategy will need to recall that it is mathematically meaningless to assign any

comforting probabilities to unique events. Because an authentic nuclear war would represent precisely such an event, one with utterly unforeseen intersections, interactions and “synergies,” we can never predict with any reassuring degree of precision whether such a conflict would actually be more or less probable. Indeed, should Trump ever proceed to strike Iran on the erroneously nonspecific assumption that his generals have already “got everything covered,” he ought then to be reminded of the classic military warning of Carl von Clausewitz: Long before any military planners could even envision a nuclear war, the great Prussian general had cautioned about “friction,” or “the difference between war on paper, and war as it actually is.”

Where it would be minimized or disregarded altogether by Trump, this difference could propel the unsteady Middle East toward an irreversible Armageddon.

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