

# Taking on the mullahs is a step too far for Trump

● One last attempt at negotiation may be a wiser move than getting involved in a toxic, unwinnable war



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**T**hough an accomplished composer of nasty nicknames for others, Donald Trump did not take kindly to discovering recently that he had a new nickname himself, Taco — an acronym that stands for “Trump always chickens out”.

In the light of his recent flip-flopping over tariffs and immigration policy, along with his seemingly inexhaustible tolerance for Vladimir Putin's repeated failures to agree a ceasefire in Ukraine, there is more than a modicum of evidence for Trump's new moniker — which is why it rankles so much with him.

It would now seem that we have two versions of the 47th president of the United States; Trump the impulsive and Trump the procrastinator.

Which of the two Trumps is now speaking with regard to the Israel-Iran war is of critical importance to the future of world peace and the economic well-being of all of us. Despite its significance, it is, frankly, extremely difficult to discern which Trump is currently holding forth about the war.

Speaking to the world's press last week, Trump was keeping his cards close to his chest on his intentions of using so-called bunker-busting bombs to eliminate Iran's subterranean nuclear facility at Fordo. “I may do it. I may not do it. I mean, nobody knows what I'm going to do,” he said.

At that juncture, it is probably fair to say that the “know nothings” may even have included Donald

Trump himself. However, given the myriad comments by the fabled those-with-knowledge-of-the-matter, there seemed to be a certain inevitability about the direction of travel. It looked like the Fordow nuclear facility's days were numbered.

Then came Thursday's announcement of a change of heart as Trump decided to give peace a chance. Was this a simple case of Trump living up to his new nickname and chickening out, or is there a genuine prospect of a negotiated peace settlement in this war? Through a White House spokesperson, Trump said: “Given the increasing likelihood of direct negotiations with Iran, I will make my decision on whether to launch an attack within the next two weeks.”

Israel mounted its pre-emptive strike against Iran in the belief Tehran was close to “the point of no return” in pursuit of a nuclear weapon. As the Israeli air force continues its unimpeded mastery of Iranian skies and with key members of the regime's military high command and leading nuclear scientists assassinated, the Islamist regime in Tehran has never looked more vulnerable.

Given the stated objective of Israel's massive aerial bombardment is to eliminate Iran's nuclear weapons programme, it is interesting to note that Israeli jets have refrained so far from bombing the critical uranium enrichment facility at Fordow — the current centre of world attention.

Now Trump has just postponed bombing it in what many believe would have been the coup de grace for the Mullahs' nuclear weapons ambitions. So what's going on?

In Israel's case the answer is straightforward. It does not have the technological ability in either munitions or aircraft to eliminate Fordo from the air. It's only other option would be a highly risky ground assault to capture and destroy the site, resulting in the likelihood of very high casualties.

For Trump, the motivations are fundamentally

different. Luminaries of the isolationist wing of his MAGA coalition such as Marjorie Taylor Greene, Tucker Carlson and Steve Bannon have already balked in public at any prospect of the US becoming involved in what they see as yet another Middle East “forever war”. Bannon has said that rather than look to the US for assistance, Israel itself should finish what it started.

While these critics have been very vocal, Trump understands that they represent a minority of his overall support base, so ultimately he believes he can handle them. Surprisingly, what may be staying the president's hand is the first category of Donald Rumsfeld's famous hierarchy of knowns — the “known knowns”. These are the things that we know we know.

**In fairness to Trump, his visceral antipathy to US entanglements in foreign wars is nothing new, it goes back decades and is based on some “known knowns”. One of which is that regime change and nation-building at the point of a gun has a very poor record of success.**

Trump is a politician who often makes decisions, even major ones, largely on instinct. For those with even a cursory familiarity with the Ladybird Book version of recent American history, one thing is known for sure. US military campaigns in countries across Asia and the Middle East including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Iraq, Iran, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Libya have been unmitigated disasters in terms of lives lost, injuries and many trillions added to the US national debt. One of the

great myths pertaining to authoritarian regimes is that they have to be strong to survive — they don't. They just have to be stronger than any combination of the internal forces arrayed against them.

To that end, they use terror to engender fear as a core survival mechanism. And it's extremely effective. In the case of Iran, for instance, its fascist thugs of the Basij and the Islamic Morality Police have regularly bludgeoned schoolgirls to death for not covering their hair appropriately.

The sheer brutality visited upon vulnerable young girls in full public view intimidates the rest of society into inaction as it is designed to do. This is not, to use that hackneyed and inappropriate phrase, “the banality of evil”; this is evil pure and simple. And it confirms two things; that evil exists and that it is never banal.

Yet in spite of its current vulnerability, its lack of popular support, and its undoubted evil nature, Trump knows that after over four decades in power, toppling the Islamist regime is fraught with difficulties and potentially massive unintended consequences. Because of its oppressive and closed nature, no outsider has an earthly idea what may happen in the wake of the fall of the mullahs.

There are decades of compelling evidence that the tribal badlands of the Middle East with their overwhelming Islamist impulses are inhospitable terrain in which the delicate flower of democracy of any kind might flourish.

In the wake of the demise of the mullahs, the chances of Iran spontaneously turning into Denmark are negligible. More importantly, there is every possibility of something worse taking their place.

Given that choice, Trump seems to have made an instinctive calculation that the mullahs you know may be better than the devils you don't, and so one last effort at negotiation is worth the effort to prevent a messianic death cult from getting its hands on nuclear weapons.

**“Islamic Morality Police have often bludgeoned girls to death**