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INTERVIEWER: We're here with Jo-Anne Hart from the Watson Institute. She's an expert on security in the Middle East. And given the alarming developments this week between the US and Iran, we thought we'd bring her in just to help us get some perspective on what exactly is happening, what we should and shouldn't hope for. Joanne, thank you very much for coming in.

JO-ANNE HART: Thanks for inviting me.

INTERVIEWER: So can you just set the stage briefly, over the past week or so, the kind of increasingly alarming things that have been going on in the Persian Gulf and around there?

JO-ANNE HART: So the US has been turning up the heat very deliberately against Iran, at least since last month when the US decided to designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization. That might not sound like much in the US, but that's a uniformed part of Iran's military. And we've never done that before. And one of the reasons that military leaders don't like it is that, what about the reciprocity of that? Does that mean that American special forces should also be designated terrorists from another point of view?

And it was just over a week ago the Trump administration sent a carrier battle group and bombers to the area. That's like a mini-fleet. That's a sizable force to be public about. And it was meant to be standing up to Iran. But it was really unspecified threats. It's really unclear what this was in response to, if anything. There's been some incidents in the Gulf region, but it's not clear at all if Iran is involved in that.

I think some of the intelligence we have to be skeptical about. Is it confirmed? Is it coming from our allies that have a lot to gain from a military engagement with Iran? In fact, some of our allies are already telling us that they're not seeing that, the British saying they don't see any change in Iran's behavior, and so on. So that's the first thing, obviously. We've been burned in the past with bad intelligence, and it's been used many times to mislead the American public to justify policies that were poor choices.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I've read you wrote recently that, going back to 1964 in the Tonkin Gulf, that bad intelligence was used to justify terrible military actions. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JO-ANNE HART: This is not anything new that we have to worry about from the Trump administration because it goes way back. And the Johnson administration in 1964 deliberately misused a nonevent, in fact, to justify American, escalated American, involvement in the Vietnam War, and just blatantly lied about it, and misled Congress. So there's a history of that.

And of course, the 2003 manufactured intelligence against Iraq, that's a cautionary tale very recent really. We're not out of that conflict yet. But I was even thinking about after Iraq invaded Kuwait, the first Gulf War in 1990, the American public was treated to these images of invading Iraqis pulling babies out of incubators. And that turned out to be completely a stunt Kuwaitis bought from a PR firm. So it's very easy in a crisis to ramp up emotions, and to say that bad things are happening, and how those things are then used. And I think as the American public we really have a role to not just take the bait because our government is telling us that Iran is doing something bad.

INTERVIEWER: It's really distressing because those three examples you use, especially two of them, ended up in a horrible protracted war. It's as though nothing has been learned. So what does the US hope to accomplish by escalating things as we have recently?

JO-ANNE HART: Oh, yes, this is so significant what we're doing there now. Because I think it's a mistake to think that because the US sends more military force there that that's stabilizing. It's the opposite. Having more forces in the area and leaning forward in this aggressive stance at Iran's front door, waiting for them to do something wrong, that is, in classic crisis terms, that is destabilizing in a crisis because proximity means that more things can go wrong and be overreacted to. It was certainly also misinterpreted or, as we were just talking about, intentionally misused.

So I'm very concerned about the American Naval assets. They're streaming up and down, waiting for something to go wrong because something can easily go wrong. There are a number of encounters that American and Iranian forces come across each other. And the context for that matters greatly.

I just have one example that just worries me in the middle of the night. Because only three years ago, an American Naval vessel was in Iranian territorial waters, wrongly, illegally. There's no question. There's no debate that the American Navy ship went wrong. And at that point, the Iranians sent their navy out to apprehend the ship. And the Americans saw that the Iranians were coming and decided, even though they have rules of engagement, the US Navy

can engage without calling anybody, calling home, et cetera. They can just shoot. They can fire.

But the American commander thought that, well, there's a-- everybody has signed the Iran nuclear agreement. The countries are on reduced tensions at this point. This will be OK instead of starting anything. In fact, that's what happened. The American ship got boarded. The American sailors were taken into Iranian custody. And that did not become a thing. The US secretary of state and the Iranian foreign minister had each other on the phone, and they made it all go away, and the Americans got out.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think that because the US has withdrawn from the JCPOA that that sort of safety valve is no longer there?

JO-ANNE HART: I can only speculate, but it frightens me what the Trump administration would do in an analogous situation. You can picture how escalation starts very quickly. That's why these are often spoke of as trip wires, a fuse that gets lit. Because once shots have been fired, there needs to be a response. And then what's the response to that? And when you think about in the Gulf area, and the US deployments in the Middle East, and so on, there are so many targets. And that's why this could really quickly become a problem.

INTERVIEWER: Well, this is incredibly disquieting. What are we risking with this sort of proximity and this potential trip-wiring of a terrible situation?

JO-ANNE HART: There is no reason I can think of that we're going to want to go to war with Iran because the risk of that war is so tremendous, really, on any level that you want to speak about. Of course, our comparison with Iraq is a starting point. Iran is almost four times larger than Iraq is. When the US invaded Iraq, there were 20 million, 26 million people population. Iran already has more than 80 million population. And it would be a whole enormous, different undertaking to go to war in that situation.

But it would also-- so it would be very deadly and destructive. It would also politically be a nightmare for that whole region. And we should talk about what it means to be destabilizing. But the other part of it is no one will be untouched from it. Because the economic consequences for the whole global market are so significant, it would even seem hyperbolic if I started to try to give estimates.

INTERVIEWER: Well, assuming that you're not being hyperbolic, what-- sort of walk us through how bad it

would be.

JO-ANNE HART: A significant portion of the world energy supply flows through that area, certainly oil, also natural gas. And everybody, every trading partner, every industrial process relies on oil transportation. So if Americans want to say to themselves, well, we are actually becoming more energy self-sufficient, and we have additional sources of energy that we've been discovering, and so on, that will be a cold comfort if the price of oil drastically changes because there's war in the Gulf. Because everybody we trade with, everybody depends on that war-- or that oil.

INTERVIEWER: So it's not at all limited just to the US and Iran. It's not limited to the Middle East. It will have worldwide effects.

JO-ANNE HART: Oh, yes. And the price affects everything but the supply. The Chinese are also buying Iranian oil. I mean, it's a rare case where there's one area that would have a reverberation for the entire globe.

One of the things that I wish people could understand better is that Iran now is not an anti-American place. Even though there's media that shows the occasional protest and so on, basically, within that, the region of the Middle East, Iran has a pretty good attitude toward the US. And public opinion is pretty favorable to the US. If we take a whole generation of-- 2/3 of Iran is young. And if we take that generation, and by going to war we would make them enemies for the rest of their lives. And we don't need to do that.

Iran has been voting very consistently for improved relations with the US. They want this. They are in favor, the public is in favor, of the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that the international community signed in 2015. They want that, and they still want that. Even in domestic politics in Iran this year has shown that there's still leadership and public that are behind that agreement. So I think this gets to the question of, why would we even do this?

INTERVIEWER: So why would we even do this, just to put yourself in the mindset of someone who does think we should go to war if provoked.

JO-ANNE HART: Well, let's take US National Security Advisor John Bolton.

INTERVIEWER: For example.

JO-ANNE HART: Because he has spoken for years vehemently in favor of regime change in Iran. He still thinks

that what the US did in 2003 against Iraq was a good plan. And this worries me because I'm not sure that lessons have been learned here. And if John Bolton thinks that the Iranian people are going to rise up and support the US in a war, that is so much more flawed even than thinking that the Iraqis were going to do that.

That is certainly not going to happen. In the Middle East, Iran is one of the most representative governments there is. And there's strong popular sentiment for Iran rejoining the international economy. That's what Iran wants. They want a growing economy. And these sanctions and the maximum pressure strategy of the US is the opposite of bringing Iran back into the fold.

I want to talk about, what do we say we want from Iran? Since we've sent the carrier battle group and this surge of force into the area, what we've, the US government, has repeated is we want to deprive Iran of the ability to destabilize the Middle East. That is problematic when I hear that.

First of all, that's a very hard-- that's not a good basis of strategy. How do you achieve this? And how do you operationalize that? But there's a good argument that the US is a big source of instability in the Middle East. And one of the things that we don't like about Iran is that its influence has grown in the Middle East more recently.

But this is so ironic and must be so frustrating if you're Iranian because the reason that Iran has greater power in the region is nothing that Iran did. It's what the US did. It's the US invasion and occupation of Iraq that was a rival with Iran. That has raised Iran's stocks in the area. And the US may well regret that. I think that they do. It maybe was an unforeseen consequence of the invasion of Iraq. But nevertheless, that's part of where Iran is right now.

We also talk about Iranian proxies as if there aren't a lot of people in the Middle East who are fighting for sovereignty, anti-imperialist, guerrilla struggles. Iran is not the boogeyman behind every-- however you want to say it. So that we say we want Iran to be-- do we want to keep Iran from destabilizing? That's a problem in itself.

INTERVIEWER: Let's pull back a little bit and examine the nuclear piece of this danger.

JO-ANNE HART: First of all, I think it's important for the attentive public to understand that Iran never had nuclear weapons. That's where we start. They didn't have them. It's not entirely clear they were ever going to develop them. But here we are, international agreement to make sure that Iran wouldn't develop any. That's the nuclear deal, 2015, the JCPOA.

When Iran signed that, it agreed to the harshest restrictions, the harshest monitoring, and verification of its program that has-- any country has ever agreed to. It's unprecedented. And they've been fully complying with that. It's undisputed. They've been dismantling, destroying even what could have been potential for a nuclear program.

So Iran is going along with that. It's the US that withdrew. It's the US, the Trump administration, that reneged on this agreement. Even so, Iran has been complying. It was a year ago that the US pulled out and called it a bad deal. And Iran has been complying ever since.

Now take us to this week. President Trump just said-- what does he want from Iran? He wants them to call him, and sit down, and negotiate a nuclear deal, a good deal. And he said, I'm going to quote, "All we want is for them not to have nuclear weapons." The hypocrisy of this must irk Iran in ways that I can hardly describe. That kind of double-standard and double-speak and bullying of Iran, that has to be part of this story.

I mean, how does Iran even respond to that? Iran has a domestic political audience. It has a constituency. It has its own voters and public opinion. And the US is in the neighborhood, poking Iran in the chest for saying it wants something that Iran has already done. We have tangible ways we could move forward. If we're not going to take those, that's bad enough. But there is no way in which we need to take the other end of the spectrum and provoke a war, respond to an incident, and start a war. Iran doesn't want a war, and we should not want a war.

INTERVIEWER: Jo-Anne, thank you so much for your perspectives, and insight, and helping us understand this situation in gray and not just black and white.

JO-ANNE HART: Thanks very much for inviting me. I'm a big fan of the show and thrilled to be here.

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