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Be glad of Starmer's caution on Iran

di Janan Ganesh

Consider the choice that came before Sir Keir Starmer less than a week ago. If the UK were to support unreservedly another opened American war in the Middle East — from where no threat was imminent — it would have shown that it had learnt the square root of nothing from the recent past. But then, if the UK were to oppose the action, it would invite Donald Trump's wrath, which itself has life-and-death implications. The defence of our archipelago relies on American support, up to and including the Trident nuclear deterrent. So does the future of Ukraine.

To this hideous dilemma, Starmer's answer has been to oppose the initial attack but then join the defence against Iran's retaliation. This is not an abundance of caution. It is the least amount of the stuff that one would expect. Nor is Starmer being indecisive. He opposed the phase of the war that he understood to be illegal, and supported the phase that he understood to be legal. Or, if international public law is not the paramount concern, put it this way. He would not have provoked Iran but, once it struck British allies, he responded with force. British jets shot down drones over Jordan on Tuesday.

In the end, Trump's wrath came anyway, as it did to Spain, with which he wants to “cut off all trade” for withholding use of its bases. But pleasing the US is a — not the — test of policy. The extent to which the Conservatives and Reform UK believe otherwise is unnerving. The Tories make much of the fact that Canada and Australia backed Trump from the start. Well, Australia sent combat troops to the Vietnam war. Britain, like the rest of Europe, did not. If the Tories regret that abstention as a betrayal of the Anglosphere, they should let us know. On Iran, Starmer's position lined up with France and Germany.

An even more important alignment is with the public. The polls suggest that British voters oppose the US action. At this point, a certain kind of armchair admiral will puff himself up and say that leadership is about leading, that Winston Churchill never read a focus group. No one who lived through the Iraq years can entertain this bluster. A country's ability to meet its war objectives does hinge on sentiment at home. The occupation of Iraq (and Afghanistan) might have gone better with a doubled or tripled troop presence, but western electorates would not have worn it. The unpopularity of a war is a rational operational argument against waging it, if not the all-decisive one.

In Britain's parliamentary system, the prime minister does not get to ask questions of the opposition leader. Columnists are not so bound. Here goes, then.

Did you expect that some air strikes on Iran last Saturday would metastasise into a regional conflict by Monday? If not, doesn't that argue for some humility going forward? If Iran were to become a failed state, what should Britain do to stabilise it? After all, by dint of geography, Britain is likelier than America to feel the ripples, including the flow of refugees. If the regime survives to become even more hostile, what should be the British contribution to removing it? Sorry to be a bore about this, but neither the Iraq nor the Afghanistan nor the Libya experiences entitle interventionists to the benefit of the doubt.

There is not enough disdain in the kingdom for this government's domestic record. Labour was never ready to run the country, as some were willing to warn at the time, when the credulous were going about with "Britain is back" on their lips.

"Domestic" is an important qualifier, though. On the foreign front, Labour has fixed some of the vandalism of the post-Cameron Tories through such innovative ploys as deigning to visit the second-biggest economy on Earth. Starmer has also improved the relationship with the EU and abased himself to Trump in Britain's (and Ukraine's) interest.

His caution over Iran is of a piece with this record. In contrast, the least electable thing about the otherwise improving Conservative leader remains her foreign posture. It is worth dwelling on something that Kemi Badenoch said this week. "Across the UK there are groups whose political loyalties when it comes to conflicts in the Middle East do not align with British national interests. These are people who Labour sees as their voters because without them, they cannot stay in power." Badenoch's most impressive trait is plain-speaking, born of clear thinking. Here, she is all coyness and innuendo. If she means Muslim voters, she should spell it out. A couple of rebuttals could then be put forward in the open. First, opposition to this war is not confined to Muslims, as she might find out in the coming weeks. Second, her party has for decades been sensationally bad at constructing the British "interest". Examples include its support for the Iraq war and a Brexit that most voters regard as a mistake.

Those who impugn the patriotism of fellow citizens should not mind if the discourtesy is returned. The British right's desire to live vicariously through the US is even more pronounced than when the Brexit vote happened a decade ago. Most of the time, it is merely unbecoming. When the issue is war, it is rather worse than that. The fatal jingoism that Wilfred Owen wrote about with such controlled anger in "Dulce et Decorum est" was, at least, on behalf of one's own country.