

Two Corrupt Establishments

Exclusive: The insurgent campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have staggered Official Washington's twin corrupt establishments on the Republican and Democratic sides, but what happens next, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The United States is led by two corrupt establishments, one Democratic and one Republican, both deeply dependent on special-interest money, both sharing a similar perspective on world affairs, and both disdainful toward the American people who are treated as objects to be manipulated, not citizens to be respected.

There are, of course, differences. The Democrats are more liberal on social policy and favor a somewhat larger role of government in addressing the nation's domestic problems. The Republicans embrace Ronald Reagan's motto, "government is the problem," except when they want the government to intervene on "moral" issues such as gay marriage and abortion.

But these two corrupt establishments are intertwined when it comes to important issues of trade, economics and foreign policy. Both are true believers in neo-liberal "free trade"; both coddle Wall Street (albeit seeking slightly different levels of regulation); and both favor interventionist foreign policies (only varying modestly in how the wars are sold to the public).

Because the two establishments have a chokehold on the mainstream media, they escape any meaningful accountability when they are wrong. Thus, their corruption is not just defined by the billions of special-interest dollars that they take in but in their deviations from the real world. The two establishments have created a fantasyland that all the Important People treat as real.

Which is why it has been somewhat amusing to watch establishment pundits pontificate about what must be done in their make-believe world – stopping "Russian aggression," establishing "safe zones" in Syria, and fawning over noble "allies" like Saudi Arabia and Turkey – while growing legions of Americans have begun to see through these transparent fictions.

Though the candidacies of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have many flaws, there is still something encouraging about Americans listening to some of straight talk from both Trump and Sanders – and to watch the flailing reactions of their establishment rivals.

While it's true Trump has made comments that are offensive and stupid, he also

has dished out some truths that the GOP establishment simply won't abide, such as noting President George W. Bush's failure to protect the country from the 9/11 attacks and Bush's deceptive case for invading Iraq. Trump's rivals were flummoxed by his audacity, sputtering about his apostasy, but rank-and-file Republicans were up to handling the truth.

Trump violated another Republican taboo when he advocated that the U.S. government take an evenhanded position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and even told pro-Israeli donors that they could not buy his support with donations. By contrast, other Republicans, such as Sen. Marco Rubio, were groveling for the handouts and advocating a U.S. foreign policy that could have been written by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Trump's Israel heresy brought the Republican foreign-policy elite, the likes of William Kristol and other neoconservatives, to full battle stations. Kristol's fellow co-founder of the neocon Project for the New American Century, Robert Kagan, was so apoplectic over Trump's progress toward the GOP nomination that he announced that he would vote for Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Clinton's Struggles

Clinton, however, has had her own struggles toward the nomination. Though her imposing war chest and machine-driven sense of inevitability scared off several potential big-name rivals, she has had her hands full with Sen. Bernie Sanders, a 74-year-old "democratic socialist" from Vermont. Sanders pulled off a stunning upset on Tuesday by narrowly winning Michigan.

While Sanders has largely finessed foreign policy issues – beyond noting that he opposed the Iraq War and Clinton voted for it – Sanders apparently found a winning issue in Michigan when he emphasized his rejection of trade deals while Clinton has mostly supported them. The same issue has worked well for Trump as he lambastes U.S. establishment leaders for negotiating bad deals.

What is notable about the "free trade" issue is that it has long been a consensus position of both the Republican and Democratic establishments. For years, anyone who questioned these deals was mocked as a know-nothing or a protectionist. All the smart money was on "free trade," a signature issue of both the Bushes and the Clintons, praised by editorialists from The Wall Street Journal through The New York Times.

The fact that "free trade" – over the past two decades – has become a major factor in hollowing out of the middle class, especially across the industrial heartland of Middle America, was of little concern to the financial and other elites concentrated on the coasts. At election time, those "loser" Americans

could be kept in line with appeals to social issues and patriotism, even as many faced borderline poverty, growing heroin addiction rates and shorter life spans.

Despite that suffering, the twin Republican/Democratic establishments romped merrily along. The GOP elite called for evermore tax cuts to benefit the rich; demanded “reform” of Social Security and Medicare, meaning reductions in benefits; and proposed more military spending on more interventions overseas. The Democrats were only slightly less unrealistic, negotiating a new trade deal with Asia and seeking a new Cold War with Russia.

Early in Campaign 2016, the expectations were that Republican voters would again get behind an establishment candidate like former Florida Jeb Bush or Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, while the Democrats would get in line behind Hillary Clinton’s coronation march.

TV pundits declared that there was no way that Donald Trump could win the GOP race, that his high early poll numbers would fade like a summer romance. Bernie Sanders was laughed at as a fringe “issue” candidate. But then something unexpected happened.

On the Republican side, blue-collar whites finally recognized how the GOP establishment had played them for suckers; they weren’t going to take it anymore. On the Democratic side, young voters, in particular, recognized how they had been dealt an extremely bad hand, stuck with massive student debt and unappealing job prospects.

So, on the GOP side, disaffected blue-collar whites rallied to Trump’s self-financed campaign and to his promises to renegotiate the trade deals and shut down illegal immigration; on the Democratic side, young voters joined Sanders’s call for a “political revolution.”

The two corrupt establishments were staggered. Yet, whether the populist anti-establishment insurrections can continue moving forward remains in doubt.

On the Democratic side, Clinton’s candidacy appears to have been saved because African-American voters know her better than Sanders and associate her with President Barack Obama. They’ve given her key support, especially in Southern states, but the Michigan result suggests that Clinton may have to delay her long-expected “pivot to the center” a bit longer.

On the Republican side, Trump’s brash style has driven many establishment favorites out of the race and has put Rubio on the ropes. If Rubio is knocked out – and if Ohio Gov. John Kasich remains an also-ran – then the establishment’s only alternative would be Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, a thoroughly disliked figure in the U.S. Senate. It’s become increasingly plausible that

Trump could win the Republican nomination.

What a Trump victory would mean for the Republican Party is hard to assess. Is it even possible for the GOP establishment with its laissez-faire orthodoxy of tax cuts for the rich and trickle-down economics for everyone else to reconcile with Trump's populist agenda of protecting Social Security and demanding revamped trade deals to restore American manufacturing?

Further, what would the neocons do? They now control the Republican Party's foreign policy apparatus, which is tied to unconditional support for Israel and interventionism against Israel's perceived enemies, from Syria's Bashar al-Assad, to Iran, to Vladimir Putin's Russia. Would they join Kagan in backing Hillary Clinton and trusting that she would be a reliable vessel for neocon desires?

And, if Clinton prevails against Sanders and does become the neocon "vessel," where might the growing ranks of Democratic and Independent non-interventionists go? Will some side with Trump despite his ugly remarks about Mexicans and Muslims? Or will they reject both major parties, either voting for a third party or staying home?

Whatever happens, Official Washington's twin corrupt establishments have been dealt an unexpected and potentially lasting punch.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Trump's Fear of a 'Brokered' Convention

Exclusive: The Republican establishment's last-ditch battle to stop Donald Trump may come down to whether convention rules can be rewritten, as ex-CIA analyst Peter W. Dickson explains.

By Peter W. Dickson

The spectacle of a deadlocked Republican convention and perhaps a nomination "bought" or brokered in Cleveland in July is a prospect that pundits have begun to take seriously as the primary and caucus contests have unfolded over the past month.

It is a scenario that particularly threatens front-runner Donald Trump, who has acknowledged that if he doesn't wrap up a majority of the delegates before the convention, he will be at "a disadvantage." And there is little doubt that the GOP power-brokers who see him as not electable (as well as a threat to the party establishment) are exploring ways to stop him at the convention and, if necessary, to "steal" the nomination from him.

Since the 11 state contests on Super Tuesday (March 1) were not winner-take-all contests, Trump was unable to drive his chief competitors, Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, out of the race. With pluralities in seven states, Trump won 240 delegates, far short of the 300 delegates that pundits had predicted before the fury over Trump's evasive remarks about an endorsement from white nationalist David Duke and the Ku Klux Klan.

Trump's main rivals were able to meet minimum thresholds to collect delegates in many of the Super Tuesday contests. But Trump regained his momentum in the March 8 contests, winning three – Michigan, Mississippi and Hawaii – while Cruz prevailed in Idaho.

Yet there is a key Republican convention rule, known as Rule 40, which could hand Trump the nomination on a silver platter because it limits the number of nominees while prohibiting certain attempts to steal the nomination away from a front runner.

The purpose of this rule was to help ensure the coronation of a clear front runner and to give a presumptive nominee a celebratory sendoff into the general election. Prior to the 2012 convention, this rule required a candidate to have won a plurality of delegates in at least five states to have his or her name put into nomination at the convention.

However, once Mitt Romney secured enough delegates to win the 2012 nomination, his supporters (especially key adviser-operative Ben Ginsburg) got this rule revised to block any person from being nominated at the convention unless he or she had won a majority of delegates in at least eight states. (Part of Romney's reasoning was to freeze out a major floor demonstration of support for libertarian Rep. Ron Paul of Texas and thus to present to the nation watching on TV a united party rallying behind the former Massachusetts governor.)

In addition to prohibiting the recording of any delegates won by candidates who failed to meet the eight-state threshold, Rule 40 barred delegates from promoting a groundswell on the convention floor for any person who did not participate in the state contests. Thus, the rule prevents a modern-day replay of the "We Want Willkie" selection of Wendell Willkie at the 1940 Republican convention. (Ironically, that would now rule out a stealth establishment

strategy to mount a “Romney, Romney” uprising at the convention in Cleveland.)

It remains to be seen if and when Trump and his rivals can secure majorities of the delegates in eight states. Trump has met that threshold in seven of the 15 states in which he has won the most votes, meaning he is just one state short of the threshold.

Cruz has won the most votes in seven states and secured a majority of delegates in four states: Idaho, Kansas, Maine and Texas. In other words, the Texas senator is halfway there. But Rubio and Kasich have made little or no progress thus far, with the former only getting a majority of delegates for Puerto Rico.

The opportunity to secure a majority of a state’s delegates becomes easier after March 15 when states can conduct “winner-take-all” primaries. That means the candidates will only need **pluralities** to win the 20 winner-take-all contests (all outside the South except Florida) to be held on or after March 15. (Another five states will give the top vote-getter a majority of their delegates.)

The number of delegates to be awarded under those rules total 960 which are almost 40 percent of all the delegates at the convention. The current situation would seem to favor Trump and Cruz as the ones most likely to exceed the eight-state threshold.

Even if Rubio and Kasich win their winner-take-all home states of Florida and Ohio, respectively, on March 15, it will be a formidable challenge in a four-man race for them to win a majority of delegates in eight states without a strong swing of support in their favor. So, it is not entirely out of the question that Trump alone or perhaps Trump and Cruz could end up being the only nominees at the convention, with all the Rubio and Kasich delegates effectively set to the side uncounted.

This outcome would mean that the magic figure – a simple majority – to win the nomination would drop below the stated requirement of 1,237 delegates. The practical effect of Rule 40, in wiping out the delegates won by candidates who cannot meet the threshold, makes a first-ballot victory a virtual certainty if there are only one or two candidates who are able to get their names placed in nomination.

Of course, there is the possibility that Republican Party leaders, who are mounting a frantic stop-Trump movement, might move to modify Rule 40 before the convention. North Dakota National Committeeman Curly Haugland, a member of the RNC Rules Committee, told The Daily Caller on Tuesday that there will be an attempt to change Rule 40 to open the convention to any candidate who has won any delegates.

Such a rule change, however, would have to be placed before the convention, meaning that it would need a majority of the delegates to pass, a difficult hurdle if Trump controls most of the votes. But if he doesn't, the maneuver could open a path for denying him the nomination on the first ballot and then steering the prize to another candidate on subsequent ballots, i.e., a "brokered" convention.

If a last-minute rule change is engineered to block Trump – or even just proposed for a vote on the convention floor – Trump and his supporters might throw the proceedings into chaos reminiscent of the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968. Or Trump could decide to run as an independent as he has suggested he would do if he is "not treated fairly."

Historical Precedents

Though there are few recent historical examples of a brokered GOP convention – the last seriously contested Republican convention was in 1976 when California Gov. Ronald Reagan challenged but lost to sitting President Gerald Ford – floor fights were far more common in earlier eras when the party bosses held sway.

In that context, it's well worth revisiting a pivotal, even iconic moment in the Republican Party's long history when the young party held its second national convention in 1860, at "the Wigwam" in Chicago. Arguably, it was the most consequential presidential convention of all time, resulting in the dramatic nomination of a "dark horse" candidate named Abraham Lincoln whose nomination was undeniably "bought" via a pivotal bargain reached in a smoke-filled hotel room well past midnight, only hours before the balloting began.

Lincoln's campaign manager David Davis "stole" the Republican nomination away from the icon of the Eastern Establishment, the famous New York Sen. William Seward. Defying the fastidious Lincoln's repeated instructions from his home in Springfield, Illinois, not to cut any "bargains" or make "any contracts that will bind me," Davis did just that and more, such as packing the arena with supporters given unauthorized tickets.

The turning point came when Davis made promises to the Pennsylvania delegation to get it to dump its favorite-son candidate (Simon Cameron) and flip to Lincoln on the second ballot. This stalled Seward's powerful surge toward a majority of the delegates and brought an end to his anticipated coronation before the start of the fourth ballot.

The Seward supporters were livid. For Lincoln's physical safety, Davis and his team fired off eight telegrams (preserved in the Lincoln papers at the Library of Congress) begging him to spurn numerous pleas that he come to Chicago to

accept the nomination.

Despite his dismay over the wheeling and dealing, Lincoln suggested to Sen. Joshua Giddings any “conditions” (i.e. deals or promises) made at the convention were “honorable ones.” But Lincoln did make some appointments in line with Davis’s promises. For the sake of party unity, Lincoln appointed Cameron as Secretary of War, although he was sacked after nine months and replaced by Davis’s former Kenyon College classmate, Edwin Stanton.

Lincoln scholars, especially biographers, have long steered attention away from what happened at the Chicago convention. The revelation that Lincoln – a Christ-like figure after his assassination on Good Friday 1865 – needed a “kingmaker” like Davis takes away from the majestic trajectory of Lincoln’s life from humble origins to his martyrdom for a just cause: the salvation of the Union and the abolition of slavery.

Obviously, the nomination rules have changed dramatically from Lincoln’s days or even Willkie’s days – with party primaries and caucuses giving a much more prominent say to rank-and-file Republicans. This “democratizing” of the selection process has allowed a wealthy outsider like Trump to charge to the front of the race, running against the party insiders and spurning the financial backing of the powerful GOP “donor class.”

Now, the Republican establishment is hurling millions of dollars into anti-Trump campaign advertising to blunt Trump’s popular appeal while counting on his three remaining challengers to block Trump’s path to a clear majority of the delegates. That would make possible a convention scenario in which rules might be rewritten to open the floor to more choices.

Besides the delegates selected by voters, the GOP establishment will have 168 non-elected delegates, primarily members of the Republican National Committee (RNC) who can vote. But unlike the 712 “super-delegates” at the Democratic convention, they will not be free to vote as they wish to thwart a particular nominee and are supposed to support the candidate who won the most votes in their state.

Still, the key fight at the Republican convention beginning July 18 may be over the rules governing who is eligible to be nominated and what might happen if no one can win on the first ballot.

Peter W. Dickson is a retired CIA political-military analyst and the author of *Old Kenyon and Lincoln’s Kenyon Men*. Copyright © Peter W. Dickson, 2016

Taking Aim at Russia's 'Underbelly'

Exclusive: While loudly complaining about “Russian aggression,” the U.S. government escalates plans for encircling Russia in a modern “Great Game,” writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Two hundred years after the “Great Game” for domination of Central Asia began with the Russo-Persian Treaty of 1813, Washington is maneuvering to increase its military presence on Russia's underbelly, this time through a “counterterrorism partnership” with Tajikistan and its neighbors.

Last month, the Pentagon announced plans for \$50 million in new military aid to Central Asia – with a focus on Tajikistan – to “counter the Taliban, ISIL [an acronym for Islamic State], and other regionally-based terrorist groups, and to promote stability in the region.” The aid will also help the U.S. military get its feet in the door by enabling “interoperability and collaboration” with local partner armed forces.



The program comes at a time when the United States and NATO are trying to counter Moscow by providing billions of dollars in new aid to Russia's neighbors, from the Baltic States and Ukraine to Georgia, and stepping up naval exercises in the Black Sea. The announcement follows a visit last November by Secretary of State John Kerry to Tajikistan and other former Soviet republics in the region, where he pledged “U.S. security cooperation.”

It also represents the first major escalation of U.S. military aid to Central Asia since the Pentagon sponsored an intensive training program for special

forces in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2012 and 2013. That operation, ostensibly aimed at boosting narcotics enforcement, was criticized by researchers who noted that it would simply eliminate competitors of the country's biggest drug trafficking rings, which are led by high-level politicians and state officials.

The new military aid program, if approved by Congress, aims to offset reverses suffered by Washington in the region in 2014. That year the government of Kyrgyzstan closed a major U.S. air base, which had been implicated in notoriously corrupt dealings with the country's former president. Kyrgyzstan also joined the Eurasian Economic Union, a common market that includes Russia, and terminated an aid agreement with Washington.

The United States is not Tajikistan's only suitor, however. The chief of staff of Pakistan's army, General Raheel Sharif, met earlier this month with Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, to discuss "cooperation between national armies and law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan and Pakistan in the fight against modern threats and challenges, including terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking."

His visit came just one day after a leading Chinese military official told President Rahmon that Beijing was ready to "enhance military cooperation and multilateral counter-terrorism collaboration with Tajikistan."

Tajikistan is already a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which promotes military cooperation and intelligence sharing with China, Russia and other member states. Tajikistan is also a key transit country for a huge new gas pipeline slated to run from Turkmenistan to China. China's longer-run plans call for Tajikistan to become the first link in a planned commercial route from China to Europe's markets, called the Silk Road Economic Belt.

For now, Russia still enjoys the strongest presence in Tajikistan. It stations several thousand troops in the country to support border security. Moscow recently earmarked \$1.2 billion to train and equip Tajikistan's army and plans to hold major joint exercises in coming days. Russia hopes to prevent Islamist insurgents from moving out of Afghanistan and destabilizing other Muslim countries on or near Russia's southern border.

All of the governments courting Tajikistan are turning a blind eye to the corruption and brutality of the country's regime – which even the Russian media note is becoming "totalitarian." This May, voters in Tajikistan will almost certainly approve a referendum to anoint President Rahmon "Leader of the Nation" and amend the Constitution to exempt him from the two-term limit.

Human Rights Watch and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in February accused the

Rahmon government of “arresting, imprisoning, and torturing members of the country’s peaceful political opposition” and even kidnapping critics who live abroad.

One critic of the Rahmon regime was shot dead in Istanbul; another was seized in Moscow, where he had lived for a decade, and flown home to serve a 13-year prison sentence.

Said one senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, “Tajikistan is in the midst of the worst political and religious crackdown since the end of the country’s civil war,” which claimed the lives of up to 100,000 people in mid-1990s. “Hundreds of people [are] landing behind bars for no other reason than their peaceful political work. Tajikistan’s human rights crisis is expanding by the day, but the response of Washington, Brussels, and other international partners has fallen seriously short.”

Human rights groups called on the Obama administration to “designate Tajikistan a ‘country of particular concern’ under the International Religious Freedom Act, for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious and political freedoms without further delay.”

So far, however, the Pentagon’s plans for a closer “counterterrorism partnership” appear to be trumping the cause of human rights in Washington. And the European Union, also hoping to wean Tajikistan away from Russia, pledged 251 million Euros for development funding.

For millions of people suffering under corrupt, repressive regimes in Tajikistan and the other “Stans” of Central Asia, such interventions perpetuate the “Great Game” that foreign powers have played at their expense for two centuries. From the U.S. perspective, perpetuating our mindless military competition with Russia in such distant lands is both counterproductive and inhumane. It’s time for Washington to stop playing the Game.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]

Neocons Sulk over Iran Nuke Deal

Official Washington's neocons, who wanted so much to "bomb-bomb-bomb" Iran, are now sulking as the nuclear agreement isn't producing the horrors that they predicted, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

One of the arguments recited most frequently by those wanting to keep Iran ostracized in perpetuity – so frequently that it has achieved the status of cliché – has been that the partial sanctions relief provided for in the agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program would lead to increased "nefarious" and "destabilizing" behavior by Iran in the Middle East because it would have more financial resources for such activity.

(The public discourse about Iran is surely responsible for one of the biggest increases in usage of the adjective *nefarious*.)

It is easy to see why those determined to defeat the agreement came to rely so heavily on this argument (while ignoring the fact that the sanctions to be relieved were always intended to help induce Iranian concessions on nuclear matters, which they did). Much of the other rhetoric that the anti-agreement forces voiced, about centrifuges and uranium stockpiles and breakout times and the like, concerned subjects on which it was clear, upon even the most casual reflection, that the agreement was superior to the alternative of not having the agreement.

So opponents clung tenaciously to the notion of sanctions relief not only making bad behavior more financially feasible but also automatically leading to such behavior. Still hoping either to sabotage the agreement or at least to limit any rapprochement with Iran, the opponents continue to cling to that argument.

The argument was never valid, for multiple reasons. The supposedly "destabilizing" Iranian regional policies actually have been reactive to what others have been doing much more than destabilizing. The amount of money said to be involved in the sanctions relief gets routinely overstated. Most of the funds that had been frozen are already committed to settling accounts elsewhere rather than being available for any new endeavors in the Middle East.

Political imperatives will require the regime to give overwhelming priority, in using whatever resources are left, to repairing domestic economic damage and shortfalls, not running up new bills overseas. Most important, the argument rests on the fallacy that Iranian regional policy is determined by how many rials the Iranian regime has in its bank account, rather than by the political,

diplomatic, and security considerations that normally lead a regime to conclude that a particular activity beyond its borders either is or is not in its interests.

The argument assumes that senior Iranian policymakers routinely call in the finance minister and central bank governor and ask, “How much money do we have this month for nefarious behavior in the Middle East?” and then proceed to max out their account by indulging in such behavior. No other regime operates that way, and there is no reason to believe the Iranian regime does either.

If the argument were at all valid, then we should have expected to see a *decrease* in costly Iranian regional activity when the sanctions were imposed in the first place, and perhaps a further decrease when oil prices plunged. After all, if the Iranians did not ratchet down their activity when their financial resources went down, there is no reason to expect them to ratchet the activity up when resources increase.

But no one has painted such a picture of decreased Iranian activity because there simply is not evidence for such a correlation between financial resources and regional activism. The pro-ostracism, anti-agreement forces certainly have not painted such a picture, which, however logically necessary it is for their argument about increasing nefarious behavior, would go against the thrust of most of the other negative things those forces routinely voice about Iran. (Logical consistency across their many arguments was never a strong point of the anti-agreement forces.)

Now the nuclear agreement is in force, and we can look for any evidence of changes in Iranian regional activity. What certainly should count as significant evidence is the recent report that Iran is withdrawing from Syria a significant portion of the Revolutionary Guard Corps forces that it had deployed there. That’s right: this is Iranian regional activity – violent activity, involving combat – that is going down, not up.

Surely those observers who can be expected to be watching like a hawk whatever Iran is doing in the region would have noticed. It’s not as if the report was confined to inconspicuous places. The report first appeared on Israeli television and was replayed in other Israeli news outlets.

The Israeli report, according to which Iran is withdrawing all of a 2,500-strong fighting force while leaving 700 military advisers in Syria, is consistent with a brief comment by Secretary of State John Kerry in a Congressional hearing less than two weeks ago that Iran had withdrawn a “significant number” of its Revolutionary Guard Corps troops from Syria. But from the people who have said so much about financial windfalls from sanctions relief and how that would lead

to Iran doing more destabilizing things in the region, we get no comment. Radio silence.

It is easy to imagine what we would be hearing right now from our friends at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Israel Project, and other prominent anti-agreement, pro-ostracism voices if the report had instead been about an *increase* in Iranian troops in Syria. It would be shouted from the rooftops that this was strong evidence that the much-warned-about, post-agreement surge in nefarious Iranian behavior was under way.

Those determined to keep shining a negative light on Iran have not had a good fortnight. Besides the reporting about the withdrawal from Syria, there was the strong showing by moderate supporters of President Hassan Rouhani in the Iranian elections. Typical of the way the pro-ostracism people are couching the news right now is an opinion piece by Dennis Ross titled “Why the Nuclear Deal Hasn’t Softened Iran’s Hard-Line Policies.”

Most of the piece rehearses familiar facts about the shortcomings of the Iranian electoral system and the internal influence that hardline elements exert through certain institutions that they control. As far as external Iranian behavior is concerned, there is an all-too-familiar reliance on catchphrases, firmly in the “nefarious and destabilizing” tradition, that are thrown at the reader as if we should take them for granted, with no effort to match them with any evidence of what Iran actually is or is not doing.

Ross’s piece refers, for example, to “continued regional aggression” by Iran. My dictionary defines aggression as “an unprovoked attack or invasion.” You know – such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, or the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Where’s the Iranian aggression?

Then there is reference to Iran “employing terror” and “using the Shiite militias to subvert and coerce its neighbors.” In Syria, what Iranian forces and their Hezbollah allies have been doing is helping to prop up the incumbent regime after it came under an armed revolt, with terrorist groups prominent among the opposition.

In Iraq, Iranian forces and Shiite militias also have been supporting the incumbent regime and opposing ISIS – which puts them on the same side of that conflict as the United States. Ross says we should “make the Iranians pay a high price for bad behaviors” while offering them a way out that rejects their “demand” for “regional dominance,” and he suggests that pressure could work in the same way it did with the nuclear negotiations.

But it strains one’s imagination to think of any way such a vague bill of

particulars, so divorced from what is actually transpiring on the ground, ever could be translated into a meaningful demand at a negotiating table, let alone a clause in a negotiated agreement. It's just a recipe for punishment in perpetuity, no matter what Iran does.

And what does Ross say about the new development concerning the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria? Not a word.

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