

Behind Trump's Anti-Iran Tough Talk

Appeasing the Saudi-Israel axis in the Mideast, President Trump is talking tough against Iran and bringing his administration even more into line with neocon orthodoxy, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Trump administration is bending over backward to be, and to sound, hostile and confrontational toward Iran. This effort to flaunt a role for itself as a dedicated enemy of Iran has roots in the same factors that underlie the more widely established anti-Iranism in the United States, staying ahead of which is clearly an administration objective.

These factors include a troubled history highlighted for Americans by the hostage crisis of 1979-81. They include pressure from intra-regional rivals of Iran – especially the Israeli government but also the Gulf Arab regimes – that have an interest in depicting Iran as the source of all trouble in the Middle East and as a demon that distracts attention from problems that are more their own doing.

The United States and especially the current administration willingly succumbs to such pressure, with a habit of dividing the world simplistically into friends and enemies and taking the side of supposed friends in local conflicts in which the United States itself does not really have a valid reason to take sides. Related to that habit is the felt need to have a clear enemy as a kind of adversarial lodestar, a role that the Trump administration is all the more eager to thrust on Iran given the politically sensitive ambiguities of Trump's relationship with Russia.

Lately the administration has been working overtime to trumpet its hostility to Iran, because it was required to submit a certification to Congress regarding whether Iran is observing its obligations under the multilateral nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A certification that Iran is indeed complying with its obligations was the only plausible way to discharge this legal obligation of a report to Congress, given that Iran *is* in fact in compliance, as the International Atomic Energy Agency, implementing the most comprehensive and intrusive international monitoring arrangement that any nation has ever willingly accepted for its own nuclear program, has repeatedly determined since the agreement went into effect.

Avoiding One More Lie

In short, the agreement is working exactly as it was supposed to work in keeping Iran's nuclear activities peaceful. Any other statement to Congress on the subject would have been a lie. This President has no compunction about lying, of course, but such a lie would have meant needlessly creating a new crisis amid the other crises, foreign and domestic, that the President already has created.

The administration's unease flows from how this inescapable certification may appear to be a positive gesture toward Iran. As such, it could be seen as weakening the administration's anti-Iran credentials. Moreover, the admission that the JCPOA is working runs counter to Trump's denunciation of the agreement as the "worst deal ever."

Thus we have the administration's compensatory rhetoric of today, which includes as much negative verbiage as possible about Iran in general as well as aspersions about the JCPOA. Most of the rhetoric falls in the familiar, non-specific vein that pays no attention to exactly what Iran is or is not doing and how that does or does not affect U.S. interests and instead is essentially sloganeering. But the recent extra straining to dump on Iran and the nuclear agreement has resulted in some especially peculiar and downright silly formulations.

For example, Vice President Mike Pence, half a world away on a visit to Australia and promising at a press conference with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that the United States would abide by a refugee resettlement agreement that Trump had described as another "dumb deal," went out of his way to comment on how his President expresses "frustration with other international agreements, most notably the so-called nuclear agreement with Iran." "So-called"?

On which aspect of the JCPOA is Pence trying to cast doubt by using that label? That it involves nuclear matters? That it is an agreement? That the agreement is with Iran? Pence's comment can be filed in the same place as Trump's comment about the "so-called judge" who suspended implementation of the anti-Muslim travel ban.

A Misleading Certification

Then there is the certification itself, which is in the form of a short letter from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. The letter was publicly released under the heading, "Iran continues to sponsor terrorism." Good luck to anyone looking at titles as a way to search for a document that is about compliance with a nuclear agreement. The only support within the letter for that misleading title is the single sentence, "Iran remains a leading state sponsor of terror, through many platforms and methods."

Like many other rhetorical linkages of Iran to terrorism, this statement ignores the major changes in Iranian tactics in the years since the Iranian revolution, the fact that Iran is on the same side as the United States in combating terrorist groups such as ISIS, and the fact that the roots of the sort of violent extremism that ISIS represents are to be found far more with rivals of Iran than with Iran itself.

The day after the certification was sent to Congress, Tillerson made a statement to the press that was designed to disseminate as much compensatory anti-Iran rhetoric as possible. Tillerson's statement had all the usual generalities that pay no attention to what anyone else in the region is doing (such as in Yemen, where the Saudi and Emirati intervention in that civil war has been far more destructive and destabilizing than anything that Iran has done), but perhaps the most preposterous part of the statement was its linkage of Iran to the most salient international security problem *du jour*, North Korea.

Stop Making Sense

Tillerson said, "An unchecked Iran has the potential to travel the same path as North Korea, and take the world along with it. The United States is keen to avoid a second piece of evidence that strategic patience is a failed approach."

And then later in the statement, "The JCPOA fails to achieve the objective of a non-nuclear Iran; it only delays their goal of becoming a nuclear state. This deal represents the same failed approach of the past that brought us to the current imminent threat we face from North Korea. The Trump administration has no intention of passing the buck to a future administration on Iran."

Huh? Far from passing a buck, the Obama administration, through an immense diplomatic effort, accomplished far more to resolve what had been widely and loudly touted (such as by the 2012 Republican presidential nominee) as the number one security problem facing the United States than any other administration before or after. Far from leaving Iran "unchecked," the JCPOA imposes the most severe limitations on, and most extensive international monitoring (which continues in perpetuity) of, a national nuclear program.

If "strategic patience" has characterized some aspect of past U.S. policy on Iran, it was the earlier, pre-Obama, approach of simply piling on more sanctions and hoping that somehow that would persuade the Iranians to curtail their nuclear activities. Instead, the result was more and more centrifuges spinning and more and more uranium getting enriched – a process that the JCPOA not only halted but reversed.

A False Analogy

Whatever one may think, pro or con, about the Agreed Framework that attempted to address North Korea's nuclear activities, it was a far cry from the much more detailed, effective, and enforceable JCPOA. Bottom line: Iran does not have nuclear weapons, and all possible paths to making an Iranian nuclear weapon have been closed. That represents a world of difference from what we face with North Korea, and it is ridiculous to talk about these two cases together in terms of a "second piece of evidence."

North Korea is the severe challenge that it is today because of its nuclear weapons – which is the dimension that kept getting emphasized about Iran until, after the JCPOA closed the nuclear weapon option, those who have wanted to maintain hostility toward Iran have searched for other rationales for their hostility. Without its nukes, we would hardly be caring at all about the North Korean hermit kingdom. If Trump or anyone else could obtain an agreement with North Korea that was anything like the JCPOA, it would be a huge diplomatic triumph – and no doubt touted as such. It also would have been a huge diplomatic triumph a decade or two ago, when such an agreement might have been more reachable than it is today.

Trump himself has joined in the overtime effort to pump out anti-Iran rhetoric. At a press conference this week with the Italian prime minister, Trump again denounced the JCPOA as a "terrible agreement" that was "as bad as I've ever seen negotiated." As usual, no hint was given as what any better alternatives would look like, or why we should believe that any such alternatives are, or would have been, attainable.

Then Trump asserted that Iran is "not living up to the spirit of the agreement." What could he possibly be referring to? Trump didn't say.

Iranian Compliance

If one focuses on the nuclear obligations in the JCPOA itself, it would be difficult to find any lack of good spirit in Iran's verified adherence to the letter of the panoply of commitments it undertook. (Iran completed its initial requirements under the agreement, such as reducing its supply of low enriched uranium, with alacrity and more promptly than many expected.)

If spirit instead refers to a larger relationship beyond the nuclear agreement itself, the first thing to remember is that the parties that negotiated the agreement realized that if they attempted too broad an agenda – including Iran's grievances against the United States as well as U.S. complaints about Iran – then it probably would have been impossible to conclude a nuclear accord.

The next thing to note is that the preponderance of hostility is coming more

from the Trump administration toward Iran than the other way around, as the most recent wave of rhetoric illustrates. It was a change of administrations in Washington, not in Tehran, that resulted in discontinuation of what had been a channel of communication at the foreign minister level that was effective at addressing problems (such as U.S. sailors straying into Iranian territorial waters) beyond the nuclear issues.

And it is not just rhetoric. The most significant departure in the last three months by either government regarding actions in the Middle East was the Trump administration's direct, armed attack on Iran's ally Syria.

Perhaps most pertinent to anything that could be called the spirit of the JCPOA are all the doubts being voiced by the Trump administration as to whether it will even live up to the letter of the agreement. Contained in the certification to Congress is the statement, "President Donald J. Trump has directed a National Security Council-led interagency review of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that will evaluate whether suspension of sanctions related to Iran pursuant to the JCPOA is vital to the national security interests of the United States." Translation: we haven't decided whether we're going to comply with our obligations under the accord. How's that for living up to the spirit of the agreement?

All this striving to burnish anti-Iran credentials not only precludes any possibility of building constructively on the JCPOA to address other issues in the Middle East in a way that advances U.S. interests. The rhetoric – designed to excoriate one state rather than to illuminate the causes of regional problems – obscures the nature of those problems, distorts public and Congressional understanding of them, and consequently makes those problems all the harder to address effectively.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

The Pro-War Twist of the 'Resistance'

Exclusive: The anti-Trump "#Resistance" has become a movement to defend the Democratic establishment's pro-war policies, to purge anti-war Democrats, and even to embrace Donald Trump's attack on Syria, reports James W Carden.

By James W Carden

The Resistance, a self-aggrandizing term for what amounts to a relatively small but still powerful clique of embittered Clinton surrogates, has been keeping itself busy of late, fanning the flames of McCarthyite recriminations against anyone who dares question the rather flimsy public evidence that Russia influenced the results of the 2016 election, all the while cheering on President Trump's expansion of the war in Syria.

Like its approach to the question of Russia and the election, the Resistance will brook no dissent over whether or not President Trump did the "right thing" in unleashing 59 Tomahawk missiles on a country which we are not at war with and which has never attacked us.

As with their hysterical claims that Russia stole the election from Hillary Clinton, the Resistance is loathe to allow facts, logic or evidence to get in the way of its view that Donald Trump acted in the security interests of the United States by bombing the Syrian military which (with air support from the Russians) is currently in the process in routing ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Neoliberal Clinton partisan Ruth Marcus of the *Washington Post* wrote that in her view "Trump is, if not behaving normally, at least adopting normal positions." Bombing Syria, in the absence of a legal mandate from the United Nations or with expressed authorization of Congress – both legal requirements if the U.S. Constitution and American treaty obligations are to be respected – is, to Marcus anyway, evidence of "Trump's good judgment."

Nor was Marcus alone. Clinton herself endorsed Trump's decision to use force just hours before the attack, telling a crowd of well-heeled Resisters in New York that "I really believe that we should have and still should take out [Assad's] air fields and prevent him from being able to use them to bomb innocent people and drop sarin gas on them."

Former high-ranking Obama State Department officials Antony Blinken and Anne Marie Slaughter – he in the pages of the *New York Times*, she on Twitter – also praised Trump's bombing of Syria as "the right thing" to do. *The New Yorker's* Ryan Lizza declared, "The moral case for President Trump's strike on Syria is uncontroversial."

Punishing Anti-War Democrats

In the days following the Tomahawk missile attack on Syria, it became obvious that antiwar voices need not apply to the Resistance, which clearly remains in thrall to the 25-year-old interventionist orthodoxy begun under President Bill Clinton and which continues to be treated as unassailable dogma within the

Democratic Party to this day. Those few who had the temerity to dissent from the Resistance party line were to be given no quarter.

One of the few prominent elected officials in Washington to voice skepticism of the Trump administration's case for military action against Syria was Hawaii's Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, who condemned the attack in a statement which accused the administration of having "acted recklessly without care or consideration of the dire consequences of the United States attack on Syria without waiting for the collection of evidence from the scene of the chemical poisoning."

The knives came out for Gabbard even before the proverbial ink on the statement was dry. To no one's surprise, *The Washington Post* quickly ran a smear job by Elise Viebeck titled "What is Tulsi Gabbard thinking on Syria?" In it, Viebeck declared that "Gabbard has dug herself into a hole in recent weeks with her bizarre but insistent views about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his country's bloody six years of civil war."

But what really seemed to offend Viebeck – and by extension, her employers at the *Post* – was Gabbard's effrontery in committing an act of *lese majeste* against that which all right-thinking people in Washington "know" or, as Viebeck put it: "her striking departure from the consensus that Assad's government launched the attack."

Viebeck chronicled the Resistance's disgust with the Congresswoman's penchant for independent, critical thinking. No less a Resistance figure than MSNBC's Joy Reid tweeted that "People who have insisted Gabbard is the future of the Democratic Party may need to consider her outré views on issues like Assad." Other Resistance leaders piled on, too: The Daily Kos; Center for American Progress president and close Clinton adviser Neera Tanden; and former Vermont Governor and ex-Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean all voiced their opinion that Gabbard should face a primary challenge in 2018. Indeed, according to Dean, the heath insurance lobbyist, "Gabbard should not be in Congress."

Of course, all the handwringing over Gabbard's comments were simply another opportunity for the right-minded to double down on their criticism of Gabbard's controversial meeting with Syria's Bashar al-Assad in January. Then as now, the *Washington Post* was at the forefront of the character attacks, running a piece by Josh Rogin titled "How Tulsi Gabbard became Assad's mouthpiece in Washington" on Jan. 29. Yet Rogin's piece was so sloppy and error-ridden that the *Post* had to append a humiliating paragraph long correction to it after it was published.

Ignoring Syrian Reality

Nevertheless, the Resistance's cry of "what about Assad?" is a case of Democratic luminaries polishing up their reputations for virtue and signaling their commitments to career advancement, nothing more. It leaves out the fact that the Syrian opposition also bears responsibility for the start of the violence in 2011.

As Father Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch missionary to Syria who was murdered by rebel forces in 2014, put it: "From the start, the protest movements were not purely peaceful. From the start I saw armed demonstrators marching along in the protests, who began to shoot at the police first. Very often the violence of the security forces has been a reaction to the brutal violence of the armed rebels."

The murdered Dutch priest also observed as early as 2011, that "The opposition of the street is much stronger than any other opposition. And this opposition is armed and frequently employs brutality and violence, only in order then to blame the government."

The "what about Assad?" line also begs us to ignore what the likely consequences of his removal from power would actually mean: Who exactly do they think would fill the vacuum? The obsession with Assad also willfully ignores the immorality of U.S. policy, which involves repeatedly bombing Syria while funding and training violent extremists who seek to overthrow a sovereign government.

U.S. policy, wholeheartedly supported by the Resistance, tramples international law and makes a mockery of the tenets of Just War Theory. It results in violence, death and destruction abroad and sets the stage for retaliatory acts of violence upon our own people at home.

And so, in order to elide these considerations, the neoliberal left returns to the eternal, tiresome: "But what about Assad?" To which there is a pretty straightforward answer: Assad is fighting (quite successfully at present) the same enemies who attacked us on 9/11 in an attempt to stave off the wholesale takeover of Syria by Saudi-sponsored Salafists who would, as they promised in the early days of the uprising, drive "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave." Never mind what they would do to women, Shia and other apostates should they topple Assad and gain power.

Anti-interventionist and pro-peace Democrats object to this joint Saudi-Turkish project of turning Syria, which under Assad had been a secular, multi-confessional police state, into a theocratic Sunnistan, thereby carving out a state for our worst enemies.

Backing the Terrorists

The Resistance may need reminding that international politics, like domestic

politics, is about choosing, and the choice that pro-war Democrats (the vast majority of whom are die-hard Clinton supporters who still have not been able to reconcile themselves to her defeat) have made is clear: they've thrown their support behind radical Islamist terror groups in Syria because they have bought into the tedious fiction about the existence of "moderate" Syrian rebels.

But the Resistance would be better off leaving the fantasy of peace-loving moderate Syrian rebels to the hipsters at VICE and the neocons and neoliberal war hawks comfortably ensconced at Brookings, the Center for American Progress, CNN, The Daily Beast, The Atlantic magazine, and The Atlantic Council.

Another trend among the self-fashioned "Resisters" these days is towards an unthinking acceptance of U.S. government talking points, particularly with regard to Russian hacking and the Trump administration's declassified four-page report on the Syrian chemical weapons attack.

Yet given the less than inspiring record of American interventions based on faulty, distorted or simply fabricated intelligence, as in the cases of Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), the question isn't why someone like Gabbard is out there questioning the Trump administration's story, the question is: why aren't more doing so? And wouldn't questioning Trump's unilateral, illegal decision to bomb Syria seem to be the right and proper role of something which bills itself as "The Resistance"?

But no. As a friend and colleague of mine recently put it, if they were honest, the Resistance's motto really ought to be: "Long live the Cold War with Russia. Long live neoliberal Wahhabism and chaos in the Middle East."

Yet the Resistance drones on, drowning out anti-war, anti-Wahhabi, pro-detente voices all in a bid to reinforce the neoliberal foreign policy orthodoxy within the Democratic Party in the vain hope of solidifying their positions of power and influence within it.

James W Carden is a contributing writer for The Nation and editor of The American Committee for East-West Accord's eastwestaccord.com. He previously served as an advisor on Russia to the Special Representative for Global Inter-governmental Affairs at the US State Department.
