

Trump's Deceptive Drive to Kill Iran-Nuke Accord

President Trump rarely lets facts get in the way of a political agenda as he has demonstrated in his drive to destroy the Iran-nuclear accord – despite grave risks to U.S. interests, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The biggest current threat to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that limits Iran's nuclear program, comes from Donald Trump's obsession with killing the accord. That obsession is driven by his impulse to undo whatever Barack Obama did and to fulfill campaign rhetoric based on such contrarianism.

The power of that impulse should not be underestimated, no matter how much it collides with truth, reason, and the best interests of the United States. Trump has demonstrated parallel obsessions in pulling out of the Paris climate change agreement in the face of an overwhelming scientific and global political consensus, and in his current posture on health care, in which he evidently is willing to harm the health of the American people in an effort to make his rhetoric about Obamacare appear to come true.

Perhaps the best hope for slowing Trump's pursuit of his obsession about the JCPOA is the transparently ham-handed way he is going about it. His own statements have corroborated the gist of other reporting that Trump has made up his mind to kill the agreement and will bend whatever facts he needs to bend, and try whatever stratagems he needs to try, to achieve that result. Those stratagems include asserting Iranian compliance even though international inspectors say Iran is complying with the agreement, or demanding inspections of non-nuclear sites in Iran even without reason to believe that any prohibited activity is occurring there. The game being played is so obviously concocted to get a predetermined result that anyone, either foreign or domestic, with a sense of integrity ought to have a hard time going along with it while keeping a straight face.

Yet another technique is to make the United States so noncompliant with its obligations under the agreement that the Iranians will get sufficiently fed up to abandon the JCPOA. With Iran filing a formal complaint about the newest U.S. sanctions against it, the Trump White House probably has its hopes up that this path toward killing the agreement may work.

Oppose Obama

Trump's pursuit exploits a much larger opposition to the JCPOA that goes back more than two years to when the agreement was still under negotiation. As with Trump, little of this opposition has to do with nuclear weapons or with the terms and purpose of the JCPOA.

Also as with Trump, some of the opposition, including in much of the Republican Party in Congress, is based on an oppose-anything-Obama-did posture. Much of the opposition has to do with a desire to keep Iran in the status of a perpetually isolated and castigated adversary that is blamed for all or almost all of the ills in the Middle East. That desire characterizes certain other regimes in the Middle East (especially Israel and Saudi Arabia) that are rivals of Iran, want outside powers to take their side, and want international scrutiny diverted from their own contributions to regional instability.

The opposition to the JCPOA became a major, well-funded movement that came close to killing the JCPOA in its infancy. Well-rehearsed talking points, including misleading or false ones, had ample opportunity to gain air time and column space. The opposition offensive slackened once the JCPOA took effect and was no longer a front-page item. Then the election of Trump, with his campaign rhetoric including excoriation of the agreement, re-energized the opposition to the JCPOA. Many of the same old themes, notwithstanding the agreement's success in the meantime in being implemented and maintaining its tight restrictions on, and scrutiny of, Iran's nuclear program, are being repeated.

And like Trump, who keeps repeating falsehoods about crowd sizes, voter fraud, and much else regardless of how many times his assertions are disproved and debunked, the anti-JCPOA themes that are misleading or false keep getting repeated despite having been refuted long ago. The sheer repetition gets many people believing what is repeated.

Trump's Rallies

Trump himself is one of the offenders in using such themes about the JCPOA. Last week at a campaign-style rally in Ohio, for example, he repeated one of the hoariest of the anti-JCPOA assertions: that the United States "gave" Iran between \$100 and \$150 billion in assets under the agreement and separately "gave" Iran \$1.7 billion in cash. In fact, the United States has not given Iran a penny.

All of the money was Iran's in the first place. Most of the assets in question had been frozen in foreign financial accounts. The separate cash payment was resolution of a very old claim dating back to the time of the shah, in which Iran paid for some airplanes that the United States did not deliver. Pallets of cash were used because sanctions continued to shut Iran out of the international

banking system.

Trump ought to be familiar with such situations from his business career, given the number of times he reportedly stiffed suppliers and sub-contractors. The only difference is that with Trump's business, goods were delivered but never paid for. In the aircraft deal with Iran, the Iranians paid but the United States never delivered the goods.

Much faith has been placed in the "adults" in the administration to rein in Trump's worst tendencies. Reportedly the adults, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, last month urged a resistant Trump to recognize reality and certify that Iran was complying with the JCPOA. One's faith ought to be weakened by how Tillerson, at a press briefing this week, voiced some of the same old, familiar, and thoroughly refuted falsehoods and misleading themes.

More Whoppers

The biggest outright whopper was Tillerson's assertion that "they [Iran] got the immediate lifting of the sanctions before they ever had to deliver on anything." Any look at the history of implementation of the JCPOA, according to the carefully negotiated schedule, shows how drastically false that statement is.

In fact, the asymmetry in the implementation of the agreement worked in the opposite direction. Iran had to do nearly all it was going to do to curtail its nuclear program and significantly extend the "breakout" time to a possible nuclear weapon before it got an ounce of new sanctions relief under the JCPOA.

This Iranian work included gutting its heavy water research reactor, disposing of excess heavy water, cutting back its uranium enrichment cascades, taking all excess centrifuges off line, ceasing uranium enrichment at the underground Fordow facility, providing international inspectors a comprehensive inventory of centrifuge equipment, and many other measures.

It was only *after* the International Atomic Energy Agency certified that Iran had completed all these required steps that the parties moved to "Implementation Day," which was when the United States and the Europeans began sanctions relief.

Not specifically a lie, but highly misleading about the nature and purpose of the JCPOA, was Tillerson's comment that "there's another part of that agreement that talks about the fact that with this agreement, Iran will become a good neighbor – now, I'm paraphrasing a lot of language – they'll become a good neighbor, that Iran is called upon to no longer develop its ballistic missiles." Tillerson accused Iran of violating "the spirit of the agreement"

because of these issues.

Tillerson's remark wasn't a paraphrase; it was a fantasy expansion of the agreement that has been another favorite of the agreement's opponents, who criticize the JCPOA for not causing peace to break out in the Middle East. Neither has it led to a cure for cancer.

It was clear to all parties from the beginning of the negotiation that no agreement, and no limitation of the expanding Iranian nuclear program, would be possible unless the agreement focused specifically on the nuclear issue and on sanctions that supposedly are about the nuclear issue.

If the United States or other Western governments brought into the negotiation other things they did not like about what Iran was doing, then Iran would raise all the other things it doesn't like about what the United States is doing. And then nothing, including nothing about curtailing the nuclear program, would ever be agreed to.

Nothing in the JCPOA obligates Iran not to continue to develop, test, and possess ballistic missiles. Sanctions that involved materiel relevant to missiles were part of the sanctions that were supposed to be in place because of Iran's nuclear activities. And from the standpoint of U.S. national interests, Iranian missiles are nearly irrelevant as long as nuclear weapons are not part of the picture, which is part of why preservation of an agreement preventing any Iranian development of a nuke is so important.

The implementing resolution of the United Nations Security Council makes a nod to the desirability of restraint in developing missiles, but this clause was by design a vague exhortation with no binding power. Iran – facing threats from neighbors with missiles and superior air power – would never have agreed to anything firmer than that.

When Tillerson says “while this agreement was being developed, it was kind of like we put blinders on and just ignored all those other things,” this not only misrepresents what was in the field of vision and consciousness of the policy-makers and diplomats who negotiated the JCPOA. The comment also ignores how the very people who are leading the renewed charge against the JCPOA were, pre-JCPOA, singling out the Iranian nuclear program as the pre-eminent security issue towering above everything else.

Politicized Dispute

It wasn't Barack Obama who had elevated that specific issue. Mitt Romney, running for president against Obama in 2012, said an Iranian nuclear weapon was the greatest security threat the United States faced anywhere in the world.

The nuclear issue was the issue about which Bibi Netanyahu put on the first-ever cartoon show at the United Nations General Assembly. Then, when negotiations successfully resolved that issue, those whose true agenda was centered on other objectives, such as isolating Iran in perpetuity or bashing Obama, began talking about blinders and allegedly ignoring other things.

As for good neighborliness and observing the spirit of the JCPOA, there was not a hint of anything in Tillerson's remarks, just as there usually isn't in any of the comments of opponents of the agreement, about any obligations along those lines on the part of the United States. But one can get an idea of the symmetry involved by noting how the Iranian parliament, in response to action by the U.S. Congress on a "Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act" (which included the sanctions later folded into another bill and leading to Iran's formal complaint), initiated action on its own "Bill Against U.S. Adventurist and Terrorist Activities in the Region". Although "destabilizing" would have been a more appropriate term than "terrorist" in this bill too, the Iranians have plenty to point to, such as the U.S. support for the highly destructive Saudi-led war in Yemen.

All this is happening in Iran's neighborhood, not America's. And it is accompanied by unrelentingly hostile rhetoric against Iran from the current U.S. administration, which also has been emboldening Iran's regional rivals to promote even more confrontation. If not being a good neighbor constitutes a violation of the spirit of the JCPOA, then the Trump administration would need to look in a mirror to see who is most in violation.

Donald Trump's serial lying, and his penchant for repeating lies long after they have been disproven, is in a class by itself regarding dishonesty by a top American leader. But the zombie-like continuation of some familiar but already disproven assertions about the JCPOA is very Trump-like. The drumbeat of even vague or discredited criticisms of the agreement may be enough to persuade many people, including those who see through Trump's clumsy manipulations to kill the agreement, to accept that death.

If the adults in the administration want to keep that from happening, they will need to try harder and not say the sorts of things Tillerson is saying.

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A New Twist in Seth Rich Murder Case

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media dismisses any link between the murder of DNC official Seth Rich and leaked DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory” – while blaming Russia instead – but a new possibility has arisen, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

With U.S.-Russia tensions as dangerously high as they’ve been since the worst days of the Cold War, there is potential new evidence that Russia was not behind a hack of the Democratic National Committee, although Congress and the U.S. mainstream media accept the unproven allegation of Russia’s guilt as indisputable fact.

The possible new evidence comes in the form of a leaked audiotape of veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in which Hersh is heard to say that not Russia, but a DNC insider, was the source of the Democratic emails published by WikiLeaks just before the start of the Democratic National Convention in late July 2016.

Hersh said on the tape that the source of the leak was former DNC employee Seth Rich, who was murdered on a darkened street in a rough neighborhood of Northwest Washington D.C. two weeks before the Convention, on July 10, 2016. But Hersh threw cold water on a theory that the murder was an assassination in retaliation for the leak. Instead, Hersh concurs with the D.C. police who say the murder was a botched robbery.

Mainstream news outlets have mocked any linkage between Rich’s murder and the disclosure of the DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory,” but Hersh’s comments suggest another possibility – that the murder and the leak were unrelated while Rich may still have been the leaker.

In dismissing the possibility that Rich was the leaker, mainstream media outlets often ignore one of the key reason why some people believe that he was: Shortly after his murder, WikiLeaks, which has denied receiving the emails from the Russian government, posted a Tweet offering a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the solution of the mystery of who killed Rich.

Julian Assange, WikiLeaks founder and publisher, brought up Rich’s murder out of context in an [interview](#) with Dutch TV last August. “Whistle-blowers go to significant efforts to get us material and often very significant risks,” Assange said. “As a 27-year-old, works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered just a few weeks ago for unknown reasons as he was walking down the

street in Washington.”

Pressed by the interviewer to say whether Rich was the source of the DNC emails, Assange said WikiLeaks never reveals its sources. Yet, it appeared to be an indirect way of naming Rich, while formally maintaining WikiLeaks’s policy. An alternative view would be to believe that Assange is cynically using Rich’s death to divert the trail from the real source.

But Assange is likely one of the few people who actually knows who the source is, so his professed interest in Rich’s murder presents a clue regarding the source of the leak that any responsible news organization would at least acknowledge although that has not been the case in many recent mainstream articles about the supposed Seth Rich “conspiracy theory.”

Hersh’s Unwitting Tapes

Hersh’s taped comments add another element to the mystery, given his long record of shedding light into the dark corners of the U.S. government’s crimes, lies and cover-ups. He exposed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War; revealed illegal CIA spying in the 1970s spurring wide-ranging Congressional investigations and reform; and uncovered U.S. torture in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In the audiotape – which Hersh told me was made without his permission – he quoted an unnamed government source who told him that Rich offered the DNC emails to WikiLeaks in exchange for money.

“What I know comes off an FBI report. Don’t ask me how. You can figure it out, I’ve been around a long time,” Hersh says on the tape. “I have somebody on the inside who will go and read a file for me. This person is unbelievably accurate and careful, he’s a very high-level guy and he’ll do a favor. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

The FBI cyber unit got involved after the D.C. police were unable to access protected files on Rich’s computer, Hersh said. So the FBI “found what he’d done. He had submitted a series of documents, of emails. Some juicy emails from the DNC,” to Wikileaks, Hersh said.

“He offered a sample, an extensive sample, you know I’m sure dozens of emails and said ‘I want money.’ Then later Wikileaks did get the password, he had a Dropbox, a protected Dropbox,” Hersh said.

“Wikileaks got access, and before he was killed ... he also, and this is also in the FBI report, he also let people know, with whom he was dealing. ... I don’t know how he dealt with the Wikileaks and the mechanism but ... the word was passed

according to the NSA report, 'I've also shared this box with a couple of friends so if anything happens to me it's not going to solve your problem.'" Hersh said he didn't know what this "problem" was.

Either Hersh misspoke when he mentioned an "NSA report," instead meaning the FBI report, or the National Security Agency may have provided a record of Rich's communication to the FBI. Both the FBI and the D.C. police have denied that the FBI got involved in the case.

The Tape Is Leaked

The Hersh audiotape was posted on a website called Big League Politics, which displays links to Project Veritas, a right-wing group run by James O'Keefe, though there is no evidence that Veritas was involved in the Hersh tape. Veritas does undercover audio and video recordings of unsuspecting subjects and has been accused of doctoring its video and audiotapes. But a recent O'Keefe undercover video of a CNN medical producer saying the network's coverage of the Russia-gate story was "bullshit" was confirmed by CNN, which took no action against the producer.

People who believe that Hersh's apparent revelation could reduce Russia-U.S. tensions are clamoring for him to confirm what he said. Popular blogger Caitlin Johnstone wrote: "If Hersh has any information at all indicating that the WikiLeaks releases last year came not from Russian hackers but from a leaker on the inside, he is morally obligated to volunteer all the information that he has. Even the slightest possibility that his information could help halt America's collision course with Russia by killing public support for new cold war escalations makes his remaining silent absolutely inexcusable."

Only Hersh's voice is heard on the taped interview, which was conducted by Ed Butowsky, a wealthy Republican donor and Trump supporter. Until now, Hersh's only public comment about the tape was to National Public Radio. "I hear gossip," Hersh said. "[Butowsky] took two and two and made 45 out of it."

I contacted Hersh on Friday via email. He confirmed to me that it was his voice on the tape by angrily condemning those who he said secretly recorded him, without identifying them. He did not respond when I asked him whether he thought the tape may have been altered. Hersh refused to comment further.

On June 2, in an exchange of emails between Hersh and Butowsky, Hersh denied any knowledge of the FBI report. That was two months before Hersh discovered that he had been secretly recorded when the tape was made public on Aug. 1 by Big League Politics. A screenshot of the Hersh-Butowsky email exchange was published by Big League Politics last week.

"I am curious why you haven't approached the house committee telling them what you were read by your FBI friend related to Seth Rich that you in turn read to me," Butowsky wrote.

Hersh replied: "ed –you have a lousy memory...i was not read anything by my fbi friend..i have no firsthand information and i really wish you would stop telling others information that you think i have...please stop relaying information that you do not have right...and that i have no reason to believe is accurate..."

Without informing him that he had been recorded, Butowsky replies: "I know it isn't first hand knowledge but you clearly said, my memory is perfect, that you had a friend at the FBI who read / told you what was in the file on Seth Rich and I wonder why you aren't helping your country and sharing that information on who it was?"

Further suggesting that Rich may have been the source of the DNC emails, WikiLeaks [posted](#) a link to the audiotape on Twitter.

Hersh has given no indication he's planning to write a piece based on his source who he said has seen the FBI report. Hersh has found it difficult to be published in recent years in the United States. He has been writing for the *London Review of Books* until that publication earlier this year rejected a piece challenging the purported U.S. evidence blaming a chemical weapons attack in Syria, which led to Trump's bombing of a Syrian air field. Hersh's story was published instead in a major German weekly, *Die Welt*.

MSM Contempt

Corporate media's uniform reaction has been to treat the idea of Seth Rich being WikiLeaks's source as a "conspiracy theory" – while mostly ignoring Assange's hints and now the Hersh tape. Major U.S. media outlets cover Russia-gate as if Russian interference in last November's U.S. election is proven, rather than based on a shaky "assessment" by "hand-picked" analysts from three – not all 17 – U.S. intelligence agencies.

If Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller is serious about getting to the bottom of who WikiLeaks's source is there are several avenues he could pursue. He could check Rich's bank accounts to see if there was a transfer of money from a representative of WikiLeaks. He could try to find Rich's friends who may have been given his DropBox password. He could seek to interview Hersh.

"Someone ought to ask Mueller, if he had an ounce of integrity (which [he doesn't](#)), why he's not showing these FBI and/or NSA reports to his Grand Jury which could blow the lid off of 'Russiagate' that Mueller was appointed to investigate," former FBI official and whistleblower Coleen Rowley told me in an

email. "It's sad the FBI could be keeping this secret. But I think the [Rich] family could sue to get the FBI Report that Hersh mentioned or now that FOX is sued, its attorneys could try to subpoena the FBI documents in discovery." She added that the FBI would likely fight such a subpoena, however.

The lawsuit that Rowley mentioned was filed by Rod Wheeler, a D.C. private detective, against Butowsky and Fox News. Wheeler was hired by Butowsky on behalf of the Rich family to find the killer. In a Fox News item on May 16, Wheeler was quoted referring to a Fox source in the federal government who said that Rich was WikiLeaks's source.

Fox News retracted the story a week later citing unspecified breaches of its editorial policies. At the time Fox had suffered ad boycotts when its chairman, Roger Ailes, and then its top presenter, Bill O'Reilly, faced sexual harassment allegations. Both later resigned. Sean Hannity, another top presenter, continued to pursue the Rich story until he was threatened with an ad boycott, at which point Fox retracted the story.

Wheeler's suit now alleges that he was misquoted and that the purpose of the Fox story was to distract attention from Russia's connection with the DNC emails. Big League Politics has posted audio of Wheeler saying that Aaron Rich, the victim's brother, blocked him from pursuing leads on Seth Rich's computer.

It is not clear if Hersh's source is the same as Fox's (or if Fox was using Hersh in a second-hand way). Butowsky has a connection with Fox as an on-air commentator. The date of the Hersh audio recording has not been made known although it presumably predated his email exchange with Butowsky on June 2.

If an FBI report exists indicating that Rich was the source of the DNC emails and the report is made public, it could reduce tensions with Russia that Congress ratcheted up further last week by escalating sanctions – a form of economic warfare – against Russia as punishment for its alleged role in exposing the DNC emails and others belonging to Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta.

The DNC emails revealed DNC officials improperly interfering in the Democratic primaries to undercut Clinton's chief rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders. The Podesta emails included the contents of Clinton's speeches to Wall Street and other special interests as well as pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

On Jan. 6 – before leaving office – President Obama's intelligence chiefs oversaw "hand-picked" analysts from the CIA, FBI and NSA creating an

“assessment” blaming Russia for the hacked emails albeit without presenting any hard evidence. Russian officials have denied supplying the emails to WikiLeaks and WikiLeaks has denied receiving them from Russia.

Craig Murray, a former British ambassador to Uzbekistan and an associate of Assange, has said categorically that the WikiLeaks source was a leak from an insider, not a hack. In an email message last week to former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, which McGovern shared with me, Murray wrote: “To my certain knowledge neither the DNC nor Podesta leaks to Wikileaks involved Russia. I met with someone while in Washington who, to the best of my knowledge, was an actual leaker.”

Nevertheless, the unproven allegations of Russian interference in the election have raised tensions between the two nuclear powers to levels not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War and possibly worse. Stephen Cohen, a leading U.S. expert on Russia, said the current showdown may be even more hazardous than the Cuban missile crisis.

“I think this is the most dangerous moment in American-Russian relations, at least since the Cuban missile crisis. And arguably, it’s more dangerous, because it’s more complex,” he told Democracy Now! in April. “Therefore, we ... have in Washington these – and, in my judgment, fact-less – accusations that Trump has somehow been compromised by the Kremlin.”

In the missile crisis “there was no doubt what the Soviets had done, putting missile silos in Cuba,” Cohen said. “No evidence has been presented today of anything. Imagine if Kennedy had been accused of being a secret Soviet Kremlin agent. He would have been crippled. And the only way he could have proved he wasn’t was to have launched a war against the Soviet Union. And at that time, the option was nuclear war.”

As it still is today.

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