

Growing Risk of U.S.-Iran Hostilities Based on False Pretexts, Intel Vets Warn

As President Donald Trump prepares to host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu next week, a group of U.S. intelligence veterans offers corrections to a number of false accusations that have been levelled against Iran.

February 26, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: War With Iran

INTRODUCTION

In our December 21st Memorandum to you, we cautioned that the claim that Iran is currently the world's top sponsor of terrorism is unsupported by hard evidence. Meanwhile, other false accusations against Iran have intensified. Thus, we feel obliged to alert you to the virtually inevitable consequences of war with Iran, just as we warned President George W. Bush six weeks before the U.S. attack on Iraq 15 years ago.

In our first Memorandum in this genre we told then-President Bush that we saw "no compelling reason" to attack Iraq, and warned "the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic." The consequences will be far worse, should the U.S. become drawn into war with Iran. We fear that you are not getting the straight story on this from your intelligence and national security officials.

After choosing "War With Iran" for the subject-line of this Memo, we were reminded that we had used it before, namely, for a Memorandum to President Obama on August 3, 2010 in similar circumstances. You may wish to ask your staff to give you that one to read and ponder. It included a startling quote from then-Chairman of President Bush Jr.'s Intelligence Advisory Board (and former national security adviser to Bush Sr.) Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who told the *Financial Times* on October 14, 2004 that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had George W. Bush "mesmerized;" that "Sharon just has him wrapped around his little finger." We wanted to remind you of that history, as you prepare to host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu next week.

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Rhetoric vs. Reality

We believe that the recent reporting regarding possible conflict with nuclear-armed North Korea has somewhat obscured consideration of the significantly higher probability that Israel or even Saudi Arabia will take steps that will lead to a war with Iran that will inevitably draw the United States in. Israel is particularly inclined to move aggressively, with potentially serious consequences for the U.S., in the wake of the recent incident involving an alleged Iranian drone and the shooting down of an Israeli aircraft.

There is also considerable anti-Iran rhetoric in U.S. media, which might well facilitate a transition from a cold war-type situation to a hot war involving U.S. forces. We have for some time been observing with some concern the growing hostility towards Iran coming out of Washington and from the governments of Israel and Saudi Arabia. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster is warning that the “time to act is now” to thwart Iran’s aggressive regional ambitions while U.S. United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley sees a “wake-up” call in the recent shooting incident involving Syria and Israel. Particular concern has been expressed by the White House that Iran is exploiting Shi’a minorities in neighboring Sunni dominated states to create unrest and is also expanding its role in neighboring Iraq and Syria.

While we share concerns over the Iranian government’s intentions vis-à-vis its neighbors, we do not believe that the developments in the region, many of which came about through American missteps, have a major impact on vital U.S. national interests. Nor is Iran, which often sees itself as acting defensively against surrounding Sunni states, anything like an existential threat to the United States that would mandate the sustained military action that would inevitably result if Iran is attacked.

Iran’s alleged desire to stitch together a sphere of influence consisting of an arc of allied nations and proxy forces running from its western borders to the Mediterranean Sea has been frequently cited as justification for a more assertive policy against Tehran, but we believe this concern to be greatly exaggerated. Iran, with a population of more than 80 million, is, to be sure, a major regional power but militarily, economically and politically it is highly vulnerable.

Limited Military Capability

Tehran’s Revolutionary Guard is well armed and trained, but much of its “boots on the ground” army consists of militiamen of variable quality. Its Air Force is a “shadow” of what existed under the Shah and is significantly outgunned by its rivals in the Persian Gulf, not to mention Israel. Its navy is only “green water” capable in that it consists largely of smaller vessels responsible for coastal defense supplemented by the swarming of Revolutionary Guard small

speedboats.

When Napoleon had conquered much of continental Europe and was contemplating invading Britain it was widely believed that England was helpless before him. British Admiral Earl St Vincent was unperturbed: "I do not say the French can't come, I only say they can't come by sea." We likewise believe that Iran's apparent threat is in reality decisively limited by its inability to project power across the water or through the air against neighboring states that have marked superiority in both respects.

The concern over a possibly developing "Shi'ite land bridge," also referred to as an "arc" or "crescent," is likewise overstated. It ignores the reality that Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon all have strong national identities and religiously mixed populations. They are influenced – some of them strongly – by Iran but they are not puppet states. And there is also an ethnic division that the neighboring states' populations are very conscious of– they are Arabs and Iran is Persian, which is also true of the Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

Majority Shi'a Iraq, for example, is now very friendly to Iran but it has to deal with considerable Kurdish and Sunni minorities in its governance and in the direction of its foreign policy. It will not do Iran's bidding on a number of key issues, including Baghdad's relationship with Washington, and would be unwilling to become a proxy in Tehran's conflicts with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iraqi Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi, the highest-ranking Sunni in the Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi government, has, for example, recently called for the demobilization of the Shi'ite Popular Mobilization Forces or militias that have been fighting ISIS because they "have their own political aspirations, their own [political] agendas. ... They are very dangerous to the future of Iraq."

Nuclear Weapons Thwarted

A major concern that has undergirded much of the perception of an Iranian threat is the possibility that Tehran will develop a nuclear weapon somewhere down the road. We believe that the current Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, even if imperfect, provides the best response to that Iranian proliferation problem. The U.N. inspections regime is strict and, if the agreement stands, there is every reason to believe that Iran will be unable to take the necessary precursor steps leading to a nuclear weapons program. Iran will be further limited in its options after the agreement expires in nine years. Experts believe that, at that point, Iran is not likely to choose to accumulate the necessary highly enriched uranium stocks to proceed.

The recent incident involving the shoot-down of a drone alleged to be Iranian,

followed by the downing of an Israeli fighter by a Syrian air defense missile, resulted in a sharp response from Tel Aviv, though reportedly mitigated by a warning from Russian President Vladimir Putin that anything more provocative might inadvertently involve Russia in the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is said to have moderated his response but his government is clearly contemplating a more robust intervention to counter what he describes as a developing Iranian presence in Syria.

In addition, Netanyahu may be indicted on corruption charges, and it is conceivable that he might welcome a "small war" to deflect attention from mounting political problems at home.

Getting Snookered Into War

We believe that the mounting Iran hysteria evident in the U.S. media and reflected in Beltway groupthink has largely been generated by Saudi Arabia and Israel, who nurture their own aspirations for regional political and military supremacy. There are no actual American vital interests at stake and it is past time to pause and take a step backwards to consider what those interests actually are in a region that has seen nothing but disaster since 2003. Countering an assumed Iranian threat that is minimal and triggering a war would exacerbate instability, likely leading to a breakdown in the current political alignment of the entire Middle East. It would be costly for the United States.

Iran is not militarily formidable, but its ability to fight on the defensive against U.S. naval and air forces is considerable and can cause high casualties. There appears to be a perception in the Defense Department that Iran could be defeated in a matter of days, but we would warn that such predictions tend to be based on overly optimistic projections, witness the outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Tehran would be able again to unleash terrorist resources throughout the region, endangering U.S. military and diplomats based there as well as American travelers and businesses. The terrorist threat might easily extend beyond the Middle East into Europe and also the United States, while the dollar costs of a major new conflict and its aftermath could break the bank, literally.

Another major consideration before ratcheting up hostilities should be that a war with Iran might not be containable. As the warning from President Vladimir Putin to Netanyahu made clear, other major powers have interests in what goes on in the Persian Gulf, and there is a real danger that a regional war could have global consequences.

In sum, we see a growing risk that the U.S. will become drawn into hostilities on pretexts fabricated by Israel and Saudi Arabia for their actual common

objective (“regime change” in Iran). A confluence of factors and misconceptions about what is at stake and how such a conflict is likely to develop, coming from both inside and outside the Administration, has, unfortunately, made such an outcome increasingly likely.

We have seen this picture before, just 15 years ago in Iraq, which should serve as a warning. The prevailing perception of threat that the Mullahs of Iran allegedly pose directly against the security of the U.S. is largely contrived. Even if all the allegations were true, they would not justify an Iraq-style “preventive war” violating national as well as international law. An ill-considered U.S. intervention in Iran is surely not worth the horrific humanitarian, military, economic, and political cost to be paid if Washington allows itself to become part of an armed attack.

FOR THE STEERING GROUP, VETERAN INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS FOR SANITY

William Binney, former NSA Technical Director for World Geopolitical & Military Analysis; Co-founder of NSA’s Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center (ret.)

Richard Black, Virginia State Senator; former Marine officer in Vietnam, later Army Judge Advocate General officer, retiring as Colonel after 31 years

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John Brady Kiesling, Foreign Service Officer; resigned Feb. 27, 2003 as Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy, Athens, in protest against the U.S. attack on Iraq (ret.)

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former senior investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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David MacMichael, National Intelligence Council, National Intelligence Estimates Officer (ret.)

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA analyst; CIA Presidential briefer (ret.)

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