

Is War With Iran on the Horizon?

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war, says Bob Dreyfuss for TomDispatch.

The Trump Administration is Reckless Enough to Turn the Cold War With Iran Into a Hot One

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Here's the foreign policy question of questions in 2019: Are President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, all severely weakened at home and with few allies abroad, reckless enough to set off a war with Iran?

Could military actions designed to be limited – say, a heightening of the Israeli bombing of Iranian forces inside Syria, or possible U.S. cross-border attacks from Iraq, or a clash between American and Iranian naval ships in the Persian Gulf – trigger a wider war?

Worryingly, the answers are: yes and yes. Even though Western Europe has lined up in opposition to any future conflict with Iran, even though Russia and China would rail against it, even though most Washington foreign policy experts would be horrified by the outbreak of such a war, it could happen.

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war. Years of politically charged anti-Iranian

vituperation might blow up in the faces of President Trump and his two most hawkish aides, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, setting off a conflict with potentially catastrophic implications.

Such a war could quickly spread across much of the Middle East, not just to Saudi Arabia and Israel, the region's two major anti-Iranian powers, but Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the various Persian Gulf states. It might indeed be, as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani suggested last year (unconsciously echoing Iran's former enemy, Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein) the "mother of all wars."

With Bolton and Pompeo, both well-known Iranophobes, in the driver's seat, few restraints remain on President Trump when it comes to that country. White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, President Trump's former favorite generals who had urged caution, are no longer around. And though the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution last month calling for the United States to return to the nuclear agreement that President Obama signed, there are still a significant number of congressional Democrats who believe that Iran is a major threat to U.S. interests in the region.

During the Obama years, it was *de rigueur* for Democrats to support the president's conclusion that Iran was a prime state sponsor of terrorism and should be treated accordingly. And the congressional Democrats now leading the party on foreign policy – Eliot Engel, who currently chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Bob Menendez and Ben Cardin, the two ranking Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – were opponents of the 2015 nuclear accord (though all three now claim to have changed their minds).

Deadly Flashpoints for a Future War

On the roller coaster ride that is Donald Trump's foreign policy, it's hard to discern what's real and what isn't, what's rhetoric

and what's not. When it comes to Iran, it's reasonable to assume that Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo aren't planning an updated version of the unilateral invasion of Iraq that President George W. Bush launched in the spring of 2003.

Yet by openly calling for the toppling of the government in Tehran, by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement and reimposing onerous sanctions to cripple that country's economy, by encouraging Iranians to rise up in revolt, by overtly supporting various exile groups (and perhaps covertly even terrorists), and by joining with Israel and Saudi Arabia in an informal anti-Iranian alliance, the three of them are clearly attempting to force the collapse of the Iranian regime, which just celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

There are three potential flashpoints where limited skirmishes, were they to break out, could quickly escalate into a major shooting war.

The first is in Syria and Lebanon. Iran is deeply involved in defending Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (who only recently returned from a visit to Tehran) and closely allied with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite political party with a potent paramilitary arm. Weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu openly boasted that his country's air force had successfully taken out Iranian targets in Syria. In fact, little noticed here, dozens of such strikes have taken place for more than a year, with mounting Iranian casualties.

Until now, the Iranian leadership has avoided a direct response that would heighten the confrontation with Israel, just as it has avoided unleashing Hezbollah, a well-armed, battle-tested proxy force. That could, however, change if the hardliners in Iran decided to retaliate. Should this simmering conflict explode, does anyone doubt that President Trump would soon join the fray on Israel's side or that congressional Democrats would quickly succumb to the administration's calls to back the Jewish state?

Next, consider Iraq as a possible flashpoint for conflict. In February, a blustery Trump told CBS's *Face the Nation* that he intends to keep U.S. forces in Iraq "because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is the real problem." His comments did not exactly go over well with the Iraqi political class, since many of that country's parties and militias are backed by Iran.

Trump's declaration followed a *Wall Street Journal* report late last year that Bolton had asked the Pentagon – over the opposition of various generals and then-Secretary of Defense Mattis – to prepare options for "retaliatory strikes" against Iran. This roughly coincided with a couple of small rocket attacks against Baghdad's fortified Green Zone and the airport in Basra, Iraq's Persian Gulf port city, neither of which caused any casualties.

Writing in Foreign Affairs, however, Pompeo blamed Iran for the attacks, which he called "life-threatening," adding, "Iran did not stop these attacks, which were carried out by proxies it has supported with funding, training, and weapons." No "retaliatory strikes" were launched, but plans do undoubtedly now exist for them and it's not hard to imagine Bolton and Pompeo persuading Trump to go ahead and use them – with incalculable consequences.

Finally, there's the Persian Gulf itself. Ever since the George W. Bush years, the U.S. Navy has worried about possible clashes with Iran's naval forces in those waters and there have been a number of high-profile incidents. The Obama administration tried (but failed) to establish a hotline of sorts that would have linked U.S. and Iranian naval commanders and so make it easier to defuse any such incident, an initiative championed by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen, a longtime opponent of war with Iran.

Under Trump, however, all bets are off. Last year, he requested that Mattis prepare plans to blow up Iran's "fast boats," small gunboats in the Gulf, reportedly asking, "Why don't we sink them?" He's already reinforced the U.S. naval presence

there, getting Iran's attention. Not surprisingly, the Iranian leadership has responded in kind. Earlier this year, President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country had developed submarines capable of launching cruise missiles against naval targets. The Iranians also began a series of Persian Gulf war games and, in late February, test fired one of those sub-launched missiles.

Add in one more thing: in an eerie replay of a key argument George Bush and Dick Cheney used for going to war with Iraq in 2003, in mid-February the right-wing media outlet *Washington Times* ran an “exclusive” report with this headline: “Iran-Al Qaeda Alliance may provide legal rationale for U.S. military strikes.”

Back in 2002, the Office of Special Plans at Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon, under the supervision of neoconservatives Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, spent months trying to prove that al-Qaeda and Iraq were in league. *The Washington Times* piece, citing Trump administration sources, made a similar claim – that Iran is now aiding and abetting al-Qaeda with a “clandestine sanctuary to funnel fighters, money, and weapons across the Middle East.”

It added that the administration is seeking to use this information to establish “a potential legal justification for military strikes against Iran or its proxies.” Needless to say, few are the terrorism experts or Iran specialists who would agree that Iran has anything like an active relationship with al-Qaeda.

Will the Hardliners Triumph in Iran as in Washington?

The Trump administration is, in fact, experiencing increasing difficulty finding allies ready to join a new Coalition of the Willing to confront Iran. The only two charter members so far, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are, however, enthusiastic indeed. Last month, Prime Minister Netanyahu was heard remarking that Israel and its Arab allies want war with Iran.

At a less-than-successful mid-February summit meeting Washington

organized in Warsaw, Poland, to recruit world leaders for a future crusade against Iran, Netanyahu was heard to say in Hebrew: "This is an open meeting with representatives of leading Arab countries that are sitting down together with Israel in order to advance the common interest of war with Iran." (He later insisted that the correct translation should have been "combating Iran," but the damage had already been done.)

That Warsaw summit was explicitly designed to build an anti-Iranian coalition, but many of America's allies, staunchly opposing Trump's decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear accord, would have nothing to do with it. In an effort to mollify the Europeans in particular, the United States and Poland awkwardly renamed it: "The Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East."

The name change, however, fooled no one. As a result, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo were embarrassed by a series of no-shows: the French, the Germans, and the European Union, among others, flatly declined to send ministerial-level representatives, letting their ambassadors in Warsaw stand in for them. The many Arab nations not in thrall to Saudi Arabia similarly sent only low-level delegations. Turkey and Russia boycotted altogether, convening a summit of their own in which Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Iran's Rouhani.

Never the smoothest diplomat, Pence condemned, insulted, and vilified the Europeans for refusing to go along with Washington's wrecking-ball approach. He began his speech to the conference by saying: "The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal." He then launched a direct attack on Europe's efforts to preserve that accord by seeking a way around the sanctions Washington had re-imposed: "Sadly, some of our leading European partners... have led the effort to create mechanisms to break up our sanctions. We call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran's murderous revolutionary regime."

That blast at the European allies should certainly have brought to mind Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's disparaging comments in early 2003 about Germany and France, in particular, being leaders of the "old Europe." Few allies then backed Washington's invasion plans, which, of course, didn't prevent war. Europe's reluctance now isn't likely to prove much of a deterrent either.

But Pence is right that the Europeans have taken steps to salvage the Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In particular, they've created a "special purpose vehicle" known as INSTEX (Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges) designed "to support legitimate trade with Iran," according to a statement from the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Great Britain. It's potentially a big deal and, as Pence noted, explicitly designed to circumvent the sanctions Washington imposed on Iran after Trump's break with the JCPOA.

INSTEX has a political purpose, too. The American withdrawal from the JCPOA was a body blow to President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and other centrists in Tehran who had taken credit for, and pride in, the deal between Iran and the six world powers (the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Russia, and China) that signed the agreement. That deal had been welcomed in Iran in part because it seemed to ensure that country's ability to expand its trade to the rest of the world, including its oil exports, free of sanctions.

Even before Trump abandoned the deal, however, Iran was already finding U.S. pressure overwhelming and, for the average Iranian, things hadn't improved in any significant way. Worse yet, in the past year the economy had taken a nosedive, the currency had plunged, inflation was running rampant, and strikes and street demonstrations had broken out, challenging the government and its clerical leadership. Chants of "Death to the Dictator!" – not heard since the Green Movement's revolt against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009 – once again resounded in street

demonstrations.

At the end of February, it seemed as if Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo had scored a dangerous victory when Zarif, Iran's well-known, Western-oriented foreign minister, announced his resignation. Moderates who supported the JCPOA, including Rouhani and Zarif, have been under attack from the country's hardliners since Trump's pullout. As a result, Zarif's decision was widely assumed to be a worrisome sign that those hardliners had claimed their first victim.

There was even unfounded speculation that, without Zarif, who had worked tirelessly with the Europeans to preserve what was left of the nuclear pact, Iran itself might abandon the accord and resume its nuclear program. And there's no question that the actions and statements of Bolton, Pompeo, and crew have undermined Iran's moderates, while emboldening its hardliners, who are making I-told-you-so arguments to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader.

Despite the internal pressure on Zarif, however, his resignation proved short-lived indeed: Rouhani rejected it, and there was an upsurge of support for him in Iran's parliament. Even General Qassem Soleimani, a major figure in that country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the commander of the Quds Force, backed him.

As it happens, the Quds Force, an arm of the IRGC, is responsible for Iran's paramilitary and foreign intelligence operations throughout the region, but especially in Iraq and Syria. That role has allowed Soleimani to assume responsibility for much of Iran's foreign policy in the region, making him a formidable rival to Zarif – a tension that undoubtedly contributed to his brief resignation and it isn't likely to dissipate anytime soon.

According to analysts and commentators, it appears to have been a ploy by Zarif (and perhaps Rouhani, too) to win a vote of political

confidence and it appears to have strengthened their hand for the time being.

Still, the Zarif resignation crisis threw into stark relief the deep tensions within Iranian politics and raised a key question: As the Trump administration accelerates its efforts to seek a confrontation, will they find an echo among Iranian hardliners who'd like nothing more than a face-off with the United States?

Maybe that's exactly what Bolton and Pompeo want. If so, prepare yourself: another American war unlikely to work out the way anyone in Washington dreams is on the horizon.

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