

Pretexts for an Attack on Iran

Ray McGovern probes the step-up in U.S. belligerence towards a country posing the same non-existent strategic threat as Iraq.

By **Ray McGovern**

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An Iraq-War redux is now in full play, with leading roles played by some of the same protagonists – President Donald Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, for example, who says he still thinks attacking Iraq was a good idea. Co-starring is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The New York Times on Tuesday played its accustomed role in stoking the fires, front-paging a [report](#) that, at Bolton’s request, Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan has come up with an updated plan to send as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East, should Iran attack American forces or accelerate work on nuclear weapons. The *Times* headline writer, at least, thought it appropriate to point to echoes from the past: “White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War.”

By midday, Trump had denied the *Times* report, branding it “fake news.” Keep them guessing, seems to be the name of the game.

Following the Iraq playbook, Bolton and Pompeo are conjuring up dubious intelligence from Israel to “justify” attacking – this time – Iran. (For belligerent Bolton, this was entirely [predictable](#).) All this is clear.

What is **not** clear, to Americans and foreigners alike, is why Trump would allow Bolton and Pompeo to use the same specious charges – terrorism and nuclear weapons – to provoke war with a country that poses just as much strategic threat to the U.S. as Iraq did – that is to say, none. The corporate media, with a two-decade memory-loss and a distinct pro-Israel bias, offers little help toward understanding.

Before discussing the main, but unspoken-in-polite-circles, impulse behind the present step-up in threats to Iran, let's clear some underbrush by addressing the two limping-but-still-preferred, ostensible rationales, neither of which can bear close scrutiny:

No. 1: It isn't because Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. We of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity shot down that canard a year and a half ago. In a Memorandum for President Trump, we said:

“The depiction of Iran as ‘the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism’ is not supported by the facts. While Iran is guilty of having used terrorism as a national policy tool in the past, the Iran of 2017 is not the Iran of 1981. In the early days of the Islamic Republic, Iranian operatives routinely carried out car bombings, kidnappings and assassinations of dissidents and of American citizens. That has not been the case for many years.”

No. 2. It isn't because Iran is building a nuclear weapon. A November 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate concluded unanimously that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear

weapon in 2003 and had not resumed any such work. That judgment has been re-affirmed by the Intelligence Community annually since then.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, imposed strict, new, verifiable restrictions on Iranian nuclear-related activities and was agreed to in July 2015 by Iran, the U.S., Russia, China, France, the U.K., Germany and the European Union.

Even the Trump administration has acknowledged that Iran has been abiding by the agreement's provisions. Nevertheless, President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal on May 8, 2018, four weeks after John Bolton became his national security adviser.

'We Prefer No Outcome'

Fair Warning: What follows may come as a shock to those malnourished on the drivel in mainstream media: The "WHY," quite simply, is Israel. It is impossible to understand U.S. Middle East policy without realizing the overwhelming influence of Israel on it and on opinion makers. (A personal experience drove home how strong the public appetite is for the straight story, after I gave a half-hour video interview to independent videographer Regis Tremblay three years ago. He titled it "The Inside Scoop on the Middle East & Israel," [put it](#) on YouTube and it got an unusually high number of views.)

Syria is an illustrative case in point, since Israel has always sought to secure its position in the Middle East by enlisting U.S. support to curb and dominate its neighbors. An episode I recounted in that interview speaks volumes

about Israeli objectives in the region as a whole, not only in Syria. And it includes an uncommonly frank admission/exposition of Israeli objectives straight from the mouths of senior Israeli officials. It is the kind of case-study, empirical approach much to be preferred to indulging in ponderous pronouncements or, worse still, so-called “intelligence assessments.”

It has long been clear that Israeli leaders have powerful incentives to get Washington more deeply engaged in yet another war in the area. This Israeli priority has become crystal clear in many ways. Reporter Jodi Rudoren, writing from Jerusalem, had an important article in *TheNew York Times* on Sept. 6, 2013, in which she addressed Israel’s motivation in a particularly candid way. Her article, titled “Israel Backs Limited Strike against Syria,” noted that the Israelis have argued, quietly, that the best outcome for Syria’s civil war, at least for the moment, is no outcome.

Rudoren wrote:

“For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad’s government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis.

“‘This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don’t want one to win – we’ll settle for a tie,’ said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. ‘Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that’s the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there’s no real threat from

Syria.'”

If this is the way Israel's current leaders look at the carnage in Syria, they seem to believe that deeper U.S. involvement, including military action, is likely to ensure that there is no early resolution of the conflict especially when Syrian government forces seem to be getting the upper hand. The longer Sunni and Shia are at each other's throats in Syria and in the wider region, the safer Israel calculates it will be.

The fact that Syria's main ally is Iran, with whom it has a mutual defense treaty, also plays a role in Israeli calculations. And since Iranian military support has not been enough to destroy those challenging Bashar al-Assad, Israel can highlight that in an attempt to humiliate Iran as an ally.

Today the geography has shifted from Syria to Iran: What's playing out in the Persian Gulf area is a function of the politically-dictated obsequiousness of American presidents to the policies and actions of Israel's leaders. This bipartisan phenomenon was obvious enough under recent presidents like Clinton and Obama; but under Bush II and Trump, it went on steroids, including a born-again, fundamentalist religious aspect.

One need hardly mention the political power of the Israel lobby and the lucrative campaign donations from the likes of Sheldon Adelson. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is riding high, at least for the now, Israeli influence is particularly strong in the lead-up to U.S. elections, and Trump has been acquitted of colluding with Russia.

The stars seem aligned for very strong “retaliatory strikes” for terrorist acts blamed on Iran.

Tonkin – er, I Mean Persian Gulf

Over the weekend, four vessels, including two Saudi oil tankers, were sabotaged near the Strait of Hormuz. Last evening *The Wall Street Journal* was the first to report an “initial U.S. assessment” that Iran likely was behind the attacks, and quoted a “U.S. official” to the effect that if confirmed, this would inflame military tensions in the Persian Gulf. The attacks came as the U.S. deploys an aircraft carrier, bombers and an antimissile battery to the Gulf – supposedly to deter what the Trump administration said is the possibility of Iranian aggression.

On Tuesday, Yemen’s Houthi rebels, with whom Saudi Arabia has been fighting a bloody war for the past four years, launched a drone attack on a Saudi east-west pipeline that carries crude to the Red Sea. This is not the first such attack; a Houthi spokesman said the attack was a response to Saudi “aggression” and “genocide” in Yemen. The Saudis shut down the pipeline for repair.

Thus the dangers in and around the Strait of Hormuz increase apace with U.S.-Iran recriminations. This, too, is not new.

Tension in the Strait was very much on Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen’s mind as he prepared to retire on Sept. 30, 2011. Ten days before, he told the Armed Force Press Service of his deep concern over the fact that the U.S. and Iran have had no formal communications since 1979:

“Even in the darkest days of the Cold War, we had links to

the Soviet Union. We are not talking to Iran. So we don't understand each other. If something happens, it's virtually assured that we won't get it right, that there will be miscalculations."

Now the potential for an incident has increased markedly. Adm. Mullen was primarily concerned about the various sides – Iran, the U.S., Israel – making hurried decisions with, you guessed it, "unintended consequences."

With Pompeo and Bolton on the loose, the world may be well advised to worry even more about "intended consequences" from a false flag attack. The Israelis are masters at this. The tactic has been in the U.S. clandestine toolkit for a long time, as well. In recent days, the Pentagon has reported tracking "anomalous naval activity" in the Persian Gulf, including loading small sailing vessels with missiles and other military hardware.

Cheney: Down to the Sea in Boats

In July 2008, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported that Bush administration officials had held a meeting in the vice president's office in the wake of a January 2008 incident between Iranian patrol boats and U.S. warships in the Strait of Hormuz. The reported purpose of the meeting was to discuss ways to provoke war with Iran.

Hersh wrote:

"There were a dozen ideas proffered about how to trigger a war. The one that interested me the most was why don't we build in our shipyard four or five boats that look like

Iranian PT boats. Put Navy seals on them with a lot of arms. And next time one of our boats goes to the Straits of Hormuz, start a shoot-up. Might cost some lives.

“And it was rejected because you can’t have Americans killing Americans. That’s the kind of, that’s the level of stuff we’re talking about. Provocation.

“Silly? Maybe. But potentially very lethal. Because one of the things they learned in the [January 2008] incident was the American public, if you get the right incident, the American public will support bang-bang-kiss-kiss. You know, we’re into it.”

Preparing the (Propaganda) Battlefield

One of Washington’s favorite ways to blacken Iran and its leaders is to blame it for killing U.S. troops in Iraq. Iran was accused, inter alia, of supplying the most lethal improvised explosive devices, but sycophants like Gen. David Petraeus wanted to score points by blaming the Iranians for still more actions.

On April 25, 2008, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, told reporters that Gen. David Petraeus would be giving a briefing “in the next couple of weeks” that would provide detailed evidence of “just how far Iran is reaching into Iraq to foment instability.”

Petraeus’s staff alerted U.S. media to a major news event in which captured Iranian arms in Karbala, Iraq, would be displayed and then destroyed. But there was a small problem. When American munitions experts went to Karbala to inspect the alleged cache of Iranian weapons, they found nothing

that could be credibly linked to Iran.

This embarrassing episode went virtually unreported in Western media – like the proverbial tree falling in the forest with no corporate media to hear it crash. A fiasco is only a fiasco if folks find out about it. The Iraqis did announce that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had formed his own Cabinet committee to investigate U.S. claims and attempt to “find tangible information and not information based on speculation.”

With his windsock full of neoconservative anti-Iran rhetoric, Petraeus, as CIA director, nevertheless persisted – and came up with even more imaginative allegations of Iranian perfidy. Think back, for example, to October 2011 and the outlandish White House spy feature at the time: the Iranian-American-used-car-salesman-Mexican-drug-cartel **plot** to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. And hold your nose.

More recently, the Pentagon **announced** it has upped its estimate of how many U.S. troops Iran killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. The revised death tally would mean that Iran is responsible for 17 percent of all U.S. troops killed in Iraq.

Who Will Restrain the ‘Crazies’?

Pompeo stopped off in Brussels on Monday to discuss Iran with EU leaders, skipping what would have been the first day of a two-day trip to Russia. Pompeo did not speak to the news media in Brussels, but European foreign ministers said that they had urged “restraint.”

British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt told reporters: “We are very worried about the risk of a conflict happening by

accident, with an escalation that is unintended, really on either side.” British Army Major General Christopher Ghika was rebuked by U.S. Central Command for saying Tuesday: “There has been no increased threat from Iranian backed forces in Iraq and Syria.” Central Command spokesperson Captain Bill Urban said Ghika’s remarks “run counter to the identified credible threats available to intelligence from U.S. and allies regarding Iranian backed forces in the region.”

Although there is growing resentment at the many serious problems tied to Trump’s pulling the U.S. out of the Iran deal, and there is the EU’s growing pique at heavyweights like Pompeo crashing their gatherings uninvited, I agree with Pepe Escobar’s bottom line, that “it’s politically naïve to believe the Europeans will suddenly grow a backbone.”

There remains a fleeting hope that cooler heads in the U.S. military might summon the courage to talk some sense into Trump, in the process making it clear that they will take orders from neither Pompeo nor from National Security Advisor John Bolton. But the generals and admirals of today are far more likely in the end to salute and “follow orders.”

There is a somewhat less forlorn hope that Russia will give Pompeo a strong warning in Sochi – a shot across the bow, so to speak. The last thing Russia, China, Turkey and other countries want is an attack on Iran. Strategic realities have greatly changed since the two wars on Iraq.

In 1992, still in the afterglow of Desert Storm (the first

Gulf War), former Gen. Wesley Clark asked then Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz about major lessons to be drawn from the Desert Storm attack on Iraq in 1991. Without hesitation, Wolfowitz answered, “We can do these things and the Russians won’t stop us.” That was still true for the second attack on Iraq in 2003.

But much has changed since then: In 2014, the Russians stopped NATO expansion to include Ukraine, after the Western-sponsored coup in Kiev; and in the years that followed, Moscow thwarted attempts by the U.S., Israel, and others to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

No doubt Russian President Vladimir Putin would like to “stop us” before the Bolton/Pompeo team finds an “Iranian” *casus belli*. Initial reporting from Sochi, where Pompeo met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday indicates there was no meeting of the minds on Iran. Both Pompeo and Lavrov described their talks as “frank” – diplomat-speak for acrimonious.

Pompeo was probably treated to much stronger warnings in private during the Sochi talks with Lavrov and Putin. Either or both may even have put into play the potent China card, now that Russia and China have a relationship just short of a military alliance – a momentous alteration of what the Soviets used to call the “correlation of forces.”

In my mind’s eye, I can even see Putin warning, “If you attack Iran, you may wish to be prepared for trouble elsewhere, including in the South China Sea. Besides, the strategic balance is quite different from conditions existing each time you attacked Iraq. We strongly advise you

not to start hostilities with Iran – under any pretext. If you do, we are ready this time.”

And, of course, Putin could also pick up the phone and simply call Trump.

There is no guarantee, however, that tough talk from Russia could stick an iron rod into the wheels of the juggernaut now rolling downhill to war on Iran. But, failing that kind of strong intervention and disincentive, an attack on Iran seems all but assured. Were we to be advising President Trump today, we VIPS would not alter a word in the recommendation at the very end of the Memorandum for President George W. Bush we sent him on the afternoon of Feb. 5, 2003, after Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council earlier that day:

“No one has a corner on the truth; nor do we harbor illusions that our analysis is irrefutable or undeniable [as Powell had claimed his was]. But after watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

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