

Why the Vengeance Toward Sgt. Bergdahl

The angry politics around Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's "desertion" in Afghanistan revolve around right-wing hatred for President Obama who engineered Bergdahl's freedom from the Taliban, as Matthew Hoh describes.

By Matthew Hoh

Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl's guilty plea begins the end of this phase of an embarrassing, sad and morally absurd saga of American history.

Sergeant Bergdahl was dismissed from the Coast Guard because of mental illness, was recruited into the Army in spite of such issues, and then was sent to the frontlines of Afghanistan where he walked away from his base and was captured, kept as a prisoner, and tortured by the Taliban for nearly five years. Yet, he has been offered almost no compassion, sympathy or forgiveness by large swaths of the American public, political classes, veterans and the media.

The shameful blood-crazed calls for vengeance against Sergeant Bergdahl, screamed across Fox News, talk radio and Twitter, by millions of right-wing Americans have begun again with Sergeant Bergdahl's guilty plea.

This hostility has resumed despite an Army investigation finding no Americans were killed by Sergeant Bergdahl's departure of his unit; despite the Pentagon admitting it was known that Sergeant Bergdahl was in Pakistan within a few days of his capture, thus negating the validity of the right-wing talking points of continuous search missions for Sergeant Bergdahl that jeopardized American lives; despite the general who led the investigation of Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance stating Sergeant Bergdahl should not be punished and the colonel who led the Army's version of a grand jury trial recommending the same; despite the United States military's top prisoner of war expert testifying that Sergeant Bergdahl endured more torture at the hands of the Taliban than any American prisoner of war has endured since the Vietnam War, undoubtedly due to his multiple escape attempts and unwillingness to cooperate with his kidnappers; and despite repeated calls made by President Trump for Sergeant Bergdahl to be executed, as well as calls for retaliation against the military if Sergeant Bergdahl is not sent to jail by Senator John McCain, clear and blatant forms of wrongful and illegal command influence prohibited by military law against a defendant.

Despite all that, Sergeant Bergdahl finds himself having just entered a guilty plea and putting himself at the mercy of a U.S. Army judge.

In time, Sergeant Bergdahl may become just a footnote to America's wars in the Muslim world, wars that have killed well over a million people since 2001. But his individual story relays some fundamental truths of these American wars against Sunnis and Shias, and Arabs, Africans and Pashtuns, (it is a fact that nearly all the people we have killed, maimed and made homeless have been Muslim and dark skinned). One truth is that there is no logic to our violence, only the unending and insatiable requirement for more war and more destruction.

No Forgiveness

There is also no forgiveness in this loudly and righteously proclaimed Christian nation, only the scapegoating of a young man and his family for the failures of immoral and unwinnable wars on the murderous altar of the twin godheads of American Exceptionalism and White Supremacy.

Sergeant Berghdal's story does not just inform us of the madness of our wars overseas, but highlights our wars here at home; for our wars abroad come from the same root causes as our wars at home.

It was Sergeant Bergdahl's parents standing outside the White House with President Obama that began the rage against him and his family. This was the treason that so angered and upset the white conservative audiences of Megyn Kelly and Rush Limbaugh. Sergeant Bergdahl's white parents standing at the White House with *that black president* and thanking him for freeing their son began the scorn, the vitriol and the outrage against Sergeant Bergdahl, his mother and his father.

Jani and Bob Bergdahl, who were just released from the captivity of the unimaginable nightmare of the imprisonment and torture of their son for five years by the Taliban, had the audacity to stand with Barack *Hussein* Obama and to give him thanks. That was a betrayal to the usurped, rightful and white structures that underlie so many white Americans understanding of United States history and society.

Military Mythology

The grand mythology of American militarism, a key pillar of both American Exceptionalism and White Supremacy, does not allow for figures such as Sergeant Bergdahl. *The greatest military in the history of the world* is a required statement of faith for all American politicians and public persons, even though the American military has not achieved victory in war in over 70 years, so an explanation of collusion and cooperation with anti-American and anti-white forces is necessary to provide the causation of such an undermining.

Of course, once Bob and Jani Bergdahl stood with President Obama, the racially

fueled reactionary political anger appeared in Facebook posts and twitter rants and the lies needed to sustain that anger and turn it into a useful political tool arrived: Sergeant Bergdahl attempted to join the Taliban, Sergeant Bergdahl gave information to the enemy, Sergeant Bergdahl got Americans killed, Sergeant Bergdahl had anti-American beliefs, Sergeant Bergdahl's father is a Muslim...all claims that were untrue and disproved over time, but such a straightening of facts is almost always inconsequential to those whose identity is an abominable mix of race, right-wing politics and nationalism.

People of such a type as those who believe Jesus would be okay with them carrying handguns into church, demand that Santa Claus can only be white, and that the Confederate flag is a symbol of a proud heritage, have little time or consideration for the particulars of anything that triggers the base tribalism that dominates and informs their lives.

The fundamental aspects of Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance were well known and documented years prior to that White House announcement of his release. Veterans' organizations called for his rescue and return at rallies and Republican senators enacted legislation to help release him "Bring Him Home" and "No Man Left Behind" were echoed repeatedly by Republican politicians and pundits, and even Ronald Reagan's most famed acolyte and Fox News hero, Oliver North, wore a Bowe Bergdahl POW bracelet.

However, to be white and to stand tearfully and gratefully alongside *that black president* is unconscionable and unforgivable to many "true Americans" and so the parents' sins became the son's and Sergeant Bergdahl's treason was a dog whistle to those who believe anti-whiteness and anti-Americanism are inseparable.

For the man who used race so overtly and effectively to become President of the United States, calling during his campaign for a traitor like Sergeant Bergdahl to face the firing squad, or be thrown out of a plane without a parachute, was a rudimentary requirement in order to Make America Great Again. Even General James Mattis, who hung outside his office a horseshoe that had belonged to Sergeant Bergdahl and had been given to the general by the sergeant's father, understands the political importance of Bergdahl's treason.

General Mattis who previously had supported the soldier and given great comfort to the family, now, as Secretary of Defense, is silent. I believe Secretary Mattis to have higher ambitions than simply running the Pentagon and keeping that white base of support in his favor is not anything such a savvy and cunning careerist, such as James Mattis, would imperil.

We will soon know what, if any punishment Sergeant Bergdahl is to receive. Hopefully, he and his family will be spared further pain and they can begin

rebuilding lives that were shattered by the unending war in Afghanistan and then shattered again by the race-fueled partisan politics of the unending war against people of color in the United States.

For Bowe Bergdahl, a young man who never should have been inducted into the Army to begin with, his suffering is testament to the viciousness, callousness and hate that dominates American actions both at home and abroad. We deserve no forgiveness for what has been done, and may still be done, to him and his family.

Matthew Hoh is a member of the advisory boards of Expose Facts, Veterans For Peace and World Beyond War. In 2009 he resigned his position with the State Department in Afghanistan in protest of the escalation of the Afghan War by the Obama Administration. He previously had been in Iraq with a State Department team and with the U.S. Marines. He is a Senior Fellow with the Center for International Policy.

Busting Upward the Military Budget

The Trump administration and Congress are in accord on one thing: the budget constraints on military spending must be busted to sustain overseas bases and to fund local pork projects, writes Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although the Senate and House of Representatives have both passed the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2018 at the gargantuan sum of \$700 billion, most of the largesse has little to do with defending the United States and much to do with policing the informal American overseas empire. Thus, at least some trimming to the huge amount is possible.

Of the \$700 billion, about \$640 billion is the Pentagon's base budget and another \$60 billion dollars is allocated to fight simultaneous wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. This whopping amount exceeds last year's \$619 billion, thus flouting the "sequestration" spending caps in the 2011 Budget Control Act. Trump and the Republicans want to use budget savings from domestic spending to finance the defense spending increases. However, they will need Democratic votes to break the sequestration caps; the Democrats' price for doing so is a logrolling that would also require increases in domestic spending.

Yet the Budget Control Act has helped control federal spending, budget deficits,

and debt accumulation and should be retained. Apparently, when conservatives tout slimming down government, they don't seem to think the Defense Department is part of the federal bureaucracy.

The idea is preposterous that a country which alone accounts for about half the world's defense budget needs more money to keep the readiness of its forces high and to rebuild a military that has been depleted by long, senseless wars in the Middle East and South Asia. The Defense Department is already slathered with over \$600 billion a year and just needs to reallocate some of its funds to improve readiness and conduct rebuilding.

Yet members of Congress always propose amendments adding extra weapons systems, such as ships and aircraft, to the budget that the Defense Department doesn't request. Not coincidentally, all this wasteful and unneeded pork spending just happens to be in these members' home states. Such pork is a regular occurrence in defense budgeting and explains why the Defense budget is so massive, yet force readiness and equipment depletion remain problems.

Other wasteful spending perennially occurs on stateside military bases that even DoD would like to close, but members of Congress like to keep open because it subsidizes local economies they represent. The Pentagon offered a useful proposal that would have opened another round of base closures to save money. These savings could have been put toward readiness and rebuilding. Both the House and Senate rejected it for the aforementioned parochial reason.

Overseas Bases

To save even more money, the United States should close some overseas bases and decommission military units at those bases. Essentially, the military is like a fleet of expensive sports cars that is short on money for gas, repair, and maintenance. The overseas bases and forces need to be pruned so that the remaining forces at home have enough money for operations and support. With a \$20 trillion debt, the United States is overextended in the world; the U.S. half of global defense spending is paid for out less than a quarter of the world's GDP. Pruning the U.S. overseas footprint will help reduce the overextension.

Another way to save money would be to end unneeded and counterproductive wars in the Middle East and South Asia, which lead to increased blowback anti-U.S. terrorism. Sen. Rand Paul, R- Kentucky, laudably proposed repealing outdated congressional authorizations for the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, passed in 2001 and 2002. Congress was so scared of the proposal that it didn't even get a vote.

These two authorizations for the use of force should have been terminated. Going even further, one could question counterproductive (for the same reason as the

Afghanistan and Iraq Wars), congressionally unapproved, and therefore unconstitutional air and drone wars in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. Lives and even more money could be saved if they were also ended.

Therefore, eliminating pork spending, unneeded and counterproductive wars overseas, and excessive bases and forces at home and around the world could free up more money for military readiness and any post-war rebuilding necessary without ending the sequestration limits on defense spending needed to control budget deficits and debt accumulation, which are dragging the U.S. economy and preventing higher economic growth rates.

Ivan Eland is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute. [This article also appeared as a blog post at HuffingtonPost.]

Human Anxiety in Late-Stage Capitalism

Superficial explanations for today's social anxiety and political discontent miss the underlying reality: the crisis of late-stage capitalism in its frantic death throes, explains poet Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

A number of recent, press articles, including an over 8,000-word feature piece in The New York Times have asked, to quote the Times' headline, "Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?"

Although the question was proffered, the reporters and editors responsible for the articles remain resolutely obtuse to the obvious: The bughouse crazy environment of late-stage capitalist culture evokes classic fight-or-flight responses attendant to episodes of severe anxiety and panic attacks.

The word panic has its derivation in reference to Pan, the Greek god of wilderness and wildness, of the animal body encoded within human beings and its attendant animalistic imperatives. To wit, deracinate an animal from its natural habitat and it will evince, on an instinctual basis, a fight-or-flight response.

If caged, the unfortunate creature will pace the confines of its imprisonment, chew and tear at its fur and flesh, become irritable, enervated, languish and even die from the deprivation of the environment it was born to inhabit. A caged animal, even if the unfortunate creature endures captivity, is not the entity

nature conceived; the living being has been reduced to A Thing That Waits For Lunch.

Human beings, animals that we are, respond in a similar fashion. Experiencing anxiety is among the ways our innate animal spirits react to the capitalist cage. Inundate a teenager with the soul-defying criteria of the corporate/consumer state, with its overbearing, pre-careerist pressures, its paucity of communal eros, its demands, overt and implicit, to conform to a shallow, manic, nebulously defined yet oppressive societal order, and insist that those who cannot adapt, much less excel, are “losers” who are fated to become “basement dwellers” in their parents’ homes or, for those who lack the privilege, be cast into homelessness, then the minds of the young or old alike are apt to be inundated with feelings of angst and dread.

Worse, if teenagers are culturally conditioned to believe said feelings and responses are exclusively experienced by weaklings, parasites, and losers then their suffering might fester to the point of emotional paralysis and suicidal inclinations.

No Real Remedies

What does the capitalist state offer as remedy? Obscenely profitable, corporately manufactured and widely prescribed psychoactive medications. Treatment, which, at best, merely masks symptoms and bestows the illusion of recovery.

As R. D. Laing observed: “What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. It is radically estranged from the structure of being.”

In short, it is insanity to be expected to adapt to socially acceptable insanity. Yet we are pressured to adapt to, thus internalize odious, groupthink concepts and tenets. To cite one such groupthink example: homelessness is natural to the human condition and is a communally acceptable situation.

Closer to fact: The problem of homelessness is the result of a societal-wide perception problem – the phenomenon is the very emblem of the scrambling, twisting, dissociating, and displacing of perception that capitalist propagandists specialize in. Homelessness would be considered a relic of a barbaric past if this very simple principle was applied: Having access to permanent shelter is a human right and not a privilege.

What kind of a vile, vicious people would deny that simple proposition? Those conditioned by a lingering Puritan/Calvinist mindset to believe: Punishment for resisting the usurpation of the fleeting hours of one’s finite life must be

severe. If the over-class can no longer get away with, as was once common practice in the Puritan/Calvinist tradition, public floggings to whip the labor force into line, then those who will not or cannot comply will be cast onto the cold, unforgiving concrete of a soulless cityscape.

It comes down to this, societies that are ridden with vast wealth inequity, due to the machinations of a rapacious over-class, create the obscenity known as homelessness. Moreover, the situation is only one of the numerous obscenities inherent to state capitalism. Obscenities that include, events that are dominating the present news cycle, e.g., the predations of a lecherous movie mogul, to the sub-cretinous doings and pronouncements of a Chief of State who is a bloated, bloviating, two-legged toxic waste dump.

Trump, No Aberration

How is it then, liberals fail to grasp the fact that the Trump presidency is not an aberration; rather, his ascension to power should be regarded as being among the high probability variables of late-stage capitalism and empire building? The psychopathic, tangerine-tinged clown Trump is the embodiment of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, a development that is concomitant to over-expanded empires. Thus he will continue to flounce deeper into the quagmire of crash-engendering, economic legerdemain and perpetual war.

Empires are death cults, and death cults, on a subliminal basis, long for their own demise. Paradoxically, the collective mindset of imperium, even as it thrusts across the expanse of the world, renders itself insular, cut off from culturally enhancing novelty, as all the while, the homeland descends into a psychical swamp of churning madness.

A draining of the swamp of the collective mind cannot come to pass, for the swamp and citizenry are one. Withal, the likes of leaders such as Trump rise from and are made manifest by the morass of the culture itself. In a swamp, the gospel of rebirth and redemption is heard in the song of humus. New life rises from its compost.

In the presence of Trump's debased mind and tombified carcass, one is privy to arias of rot. While Hillary Clinton's monotonous tempo was the dirge of a taxidermist – cold, desiccated of heart, and devoid of life's numinous spark – Trump's voice carries the depraved cacophony of a Célinean fool's parade ... its trajectory trudging towards the end of empire.

As liberals new BFFL (Best Friend for Life) George W. Bush might ask, "Is our liberals learning?"

In a word, no. For example, the collective psyche of U.S. culture as been

enflamed by the revelations that actresses were coerced into sexual encounters with a movie mogul whose power in the industry was only matched, even enhanced, by his sadistic nature. The staff of his company assisted, was complicit in, or remained silent about his lechery, as did the whole of the movie industry and the entertainment press. All as NFL athletes are being threatened with expulsion from the League if they kneel during the national anthem.

The Great Unspoken

Yet the great unspoken remains: The enabling of and submission to the degradation, exploitation and tyranny, and the lack of resistance thereof share a common and singular factor: The careerism of all concerned. The cultural milieu concomitant to capitalism is at the rotten root and noxious blossoming of the situation.



Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 cinematic barnburner "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" should be required viewing for those unaware or in denial of the acuity of the film's theme i.e., becoming enmeshed within the psychical landscape of dominance, degradation, and submission inherent to and inseparable from capitalist/consumer culture will cause one to become party to societal sanctioned prostitution. When life is negotiated within a collective value system that devalues and deadens the individual's inner life thus warps every human transaction, anomie descends, the worst among a people ascend to positions of power.

"Panic is the sudden realization that everything around you is alive." – William S. Burroughs, from Ghost of Chance

When friends visited me in New York, where I lived for decades, I would take them on walking tours through the city. We would cross the Westside Highway and stroll the pedestrian walk along the Hudson River, or cross the East River by

walking across the Brooklyn Bridge.

The effect of these excursions on people was often profound ... the combined elements of the elemental beauty of the rivers and vastness of the city's architecture and scope, clamor, and the dense interweaving of traditional ethnic customs and ad hoc social codes of New Yorkers often would heighten the visitors' senses and open them to larger, more intricate awareness of themselves and extant reality ... the freeways of the contemporary mind (conditioned to be constantly engaged in manic motion, with one's mind either frenzied by an obsession with performing (ultimately futile) maneuvers directed to saving time – or stalled at a frustration inducing standstill) were replaced by the exigencies of life at street level, i.e., novel situations that had to be apprehended and negotiated.

The possibilities of life seemed greater. The crimped eros of insular suburban thought became loosened before the city's intricacies and expansiveness. Although: Not all, or even a scant few, New Yorkers can maintain the state of being. Few of us can live by Rilke's resolve to "make every moment holy." Life, in the city, becomes grotesquely distorted ... High rents, inflicted by hyper-gentrification, in combination with the deification of success and its cult of careerism overwhelm one's psyche ... There is so far to fall.

Angst (the word originally can be traced to the ancient Greek deity Ananke, the immovable by prayer and offering bitch Goddess of Necessity and the root word of anxiety) clamps down one's sense of awareness. Ananke dominates the lives of the non-privileged citizenry while Narcissus, Trump's, the Clintons', et.al. and their financial and cultural elitists' patron God rules the day. The pantheon of possibility has been decimated, a cultural cleansing has been perpetrated, by the egoist caprice of the beneficiaries of the late capitalist dictatorship of money.

Hence, we arrive at the primal wisdom tacitly conveyed by anxiety-borne states of fight or flight. Due to the reality that capitalism, on both an individual and collective basis, drives individuals into madness, all as the system destroys forest and field, ocean and sea and the soul-scape of all who live under its rapacious dominion, our plight comes down to this: We either struggle and strive, by and any and all means, to end the system – or it will end us.

Phil Rockstroh is a poet, lyricist and philosopher bard living, now, in Munich, Germany. He may be contacted: philrockstroh.scribe@gmail.com and at FaceBook: <http://www.facebook.com/phil.rockstroh>

How Netanyahu Pulls Trump's Strings

Special Report: It turns out that Hillary Clinton was partly correct: President Trump is a “puppet,” but his puppet master isn't Russian President Putin but Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the final presidential debate of 2016, Hillary Clinton famously called Donald Trump the “puppet” of Russian President Vladimir Putin. But what's increasingly clear is that Trump has a more typical puppet master for a U.S. politician – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Since Sept. 18, when the two men met in New York around the United Nations General Assembly, Netanyahu has been pulling Trump's strings on almost every foreign policy issue. Arguably, the puppet/puppeteer relationship began much earlier, but I've been told that Trump bridled early on at Netanyahu's control and even showed a few signs of rebellion.

For instance, Trump initially resisted Netanyahu's demand for a deeper U.S. commitment in Syria by ordering the shutdown of the CIA operation supporting anti-government rebels, along with the Trump administration's statement that U.S. policy no longer sought “regime change” in Damascus.

Immediately after that announcement, Netanyahu had some success in getting Trump to reverse direction and fire 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base on April 6. The attack followed what one intelligence source told me was a staged chemical weapons incident by Al Qaeda operatives in the rebel-controlled town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, possibly using sarin delivered via drone from a Saudi/Israeli special operations base in Jordan. Yet, although apparently duped by the subterfuge into the missile strike, Trump still balked at a complete reversal of his Syrian policy.

Then, in May, Trump picked Saudi Arabia and Israel as his first overseas trip as president – essentially following the advice of his son-in-law Jared Kushner – but I'm told he came away feeling somewhat humiliated by the over-the-top treatment that involved him getting pulled into a ceremonial sword dance in Saudi Arabia and facing condescension from Netanyahu.

So, over the summer, Trump listened to advice about a possible major overhaul of U.S. foreign policy that would have checked Israeli/Saudi regional ambitions, opened diplomatic doors to Iran, and addressed the Korean crisis by brokering negotiations between the North and the South over some form of loose

confederation.

There was even the possibility of a Nixon-goes-to-China moment with tough-guy Trump meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the two countries restoring diplomatic ties, a process that could have given U.S. companies a better chance to compete in the Iranian market.

Those proposed moves had the advantage of reducing international tensions, saving the U.S. government money on future military adventures, and freeing U.S. corporations from the tangle of economic sanctions – exactly the “America First” strategy that Trump had promised his working-class base.

However, instead Netanyahu succeeded in pulling Trump’s strings during their conversations on Sept. 18 in New York, although exactly how is still a mystery to some people close to these developments. One source said the Kushner family real-estate company has exposure to substantial Israeli financing that could be yanked, although Jared Kushner’s financial disclosure form only lists a \$5 million unsecured line of credit, held jointly with his father, from the Israel Discount Bank.

Trump also has major pro-Netanyahu donors to his political war chest and his legal defense fund who are strong advocates for war with Iran, including casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson, who has plowed \$35 million into the pro-Trump Super PAC Future 45 and has publicly called for dropping a nuclear bomb on Iran as a negotiating tactic. So, Netanyahu had a number of potential strings to pull.

Going on Rants

Whatever the precise reasons, on Sept. 19, Trump turned his maiden speech to the U.N. General Assembly into a war-like rant, personally insulting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as “Rocket Man,” threatening to “totally destroy” his nation of 25 million people, and parroting Netanyahu’s calls for another regime change project aimed at Iran.

Most diplomats in the audience sat in stunned silence as Trump threatened aggressive war from the podium of an organization created to prevent the scourge of war. The one notable exception was Netanyahu who enthusiastically applauded his success in jerking Trump into the neocon camp.

So, rather than shift U.S. policy away from confrontation, Trump jettisoned the diplomatic strategy although it already had dispatched intermediaries to make contacts with the Iranians and North Koreans. Instead, Trump opted for the classic neocon approach favored by Netanyahu, albeit with Trump dressing up his neocon surrender in some “America First” rhetoric.

The U.N. speech left some of the U.S. intermediaries scrambling to explain to their contacts in Iran and North Korea why Trump had repudiated the messages that they had been carrying. Privately, Trump explained to one that he just liked to “zigzag” and that the intended end point hadn't change.

Some of these tensions surfaced in late September when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson took the extraordinary step of announcing the behind-the-scenes contacts with North Korea during a state visit to China.

“We are probing, so stay tuned,” Tillerson said. “We ask, ‘Would you like to talk?’ We have lines of communications to Pyongyang – we’re not in a dark situation, a blackout.” Tillerson added, “We have a couple, three channels open to Pyongyang ... We do talk to them. , , , Directly. We have our own channels.”

In reaction to Tillerson's efforts to salvage the backchannel initiatives, Trump showed that his obeisance to Netanyahu and the neocons outweighed loyalty to either his Secretary of State or the intermediaries who had ventured into dicey situations on Trump's behalf.

In Twitter messages, Trump belittled the idea of a dialogue with North Korea, tweeting: “I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.”

“Save your energy Rex,” Trump added, before slipping in another thinly veiled threat of a military strike: “we'll do what has to be done!”

While on the surface, Trump's repudiation of Tillerson might have been viewed as another “zigzag,” it is now clear that Trump's “zigzag” explanation was just another lie. Rather than zigzagging, he is instead following a straight line marked out by Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, in Syria, Netanyahu seems to have won more concessions from Trump. The U.S. military appears to be helping the remnants of Islamist forces still fighting the government, according to Russian officials. Their accusation is that the U.S. is secretly aiding the Islamist terror groups with weapons, tactical advice and aerial reconnaissance.

In other words, Trump appears to be continuing U.S. military intervention in Syria – just as Netanyahu desires.

Falling in Line

Trump further showed that he is following Netanyahu's marching orders with the extremist speech about Iran on Friday, essentially repeating all the Israeli propaganda lines against Iran and burning whatever bridges remained toward a

meaningful diplomatic approach.

Trump's Iran speech was so ludicrous it almost defies serious analysis. It ranks with the reckless rhetoric of President George W. Bush when he pronounced an "axis of evil," with the incongruous linking of Iraq and Iran (two bitter enemies) and North Korea accompanied by Bush's bogus claims about Iraq's WMD and Iraq's alleged collaboration with Al Qaeda.

In Friday's speech, which looked like the handiwork of John Bolton, one of Bush's neocon advisers who was seen entering the White House last week, Trump repeated all the nonsense tying Iran to Al Qaeda, presumably thinking that the American people still don't understand that Al Qaeda is a fanatical Sunni terror group that targets both the West and Shiites, the dominant Muslim faith in Iran, as heretics deserving death.

The inconvenient truth is that Al Qaeda has long been connected to Saudi Arabia, which has supported these fanatics since the 1980s when Saudi citizen Osama bin Laden was supported in his jihad against Soviet troops in Afghanistan, who were there trying to protect a secular regime.

Though officially the Saudi monarchy insists that it is opposed to Al Qaeda, Saudi intelligence has used Al Qaeda as essentially an unconventional fighting force deployed to destabilize and terrorize adversaries in the region and around the world. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "The Need to Hold Saudi Arabia Accountable."]

As the Israelis have developed a de facto alliance with Saudi Arabia in recent years, they also have expressed a preference for an Al Qaeda victory in Syria if necessary to destroy what Michael Oren, former Ambassador to the U.S. and now a deputy minister under Netanyahu, has described as the Shiite "strategic arc" running from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut.

One of the frequent Israeli complaints about Iran is that it has assisted the sovereign government of Syria in defeating Al Qaeda and its militant allies (as well as Al Qaeda's spinoff Islamic State), which should tell you a lot about where Netanyahu's loyalties lie.

A Compromised Media

Yet, as dishonest as Trump's Iran speech was, the U.S. mainstream media won't criticize it as harshly as it deserves because virtually all the important journalists and talking heads have swallowed Israel's anti-Iran propaganda whole. They have frequently repeated the canard about Iran as "the world's chief sponsor of terrorism" when that title clearly should go to the Saudis and the Qataris if not others.

The West's major news outlets also have ingested all the sophisticated propaganda against the Assad government in Syria, particularly the claims about chemical weapons attacks while ignoring evidence that Al Qaeda's operatives and their "civil defense" collaborators have staged attacks with the goal of provoking a direct U.S. military intervention. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A New Hole in Syria-Sarin Certainty.](#)"]

In his Friday speech, Trump also touted one of the [earliest canards about Iranian "terrorism,"](#) the attack by Lebanese Shiite militants on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 killing 241 Americans.

When that attack happened, I was working at The Associated Press as an investigative reporter specializing in national security issues. While the precise Iranian role was not clear, what should have been obvious was that the attack was not "terrorism," which is classically defined as violence toward civilians to achieve a political goal.

Not only were the Marines not civilians but the Reagan administration had made them belligerents in the Lebanese war by the decision to order the USS New Jersey to shell Muslim villages. Reagan's National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, who [often represented Israel's interests](#) inside the administration, was the spark plug for this mission creep, which killed Lebanese civilians and convinced Shiite militants that the United States had joined the war against them.

Shiite militants struck back, sending a suicide truck bomber through U.S. security positions, demolishing the high-rise Marine barracks in Beirut. Reagan soon repositioned the surviving U.S. forces offshore. At the AP, I unsuccessfully argued against calling the Beirut attack "terrorism," a word that other news organizations also sloppily applied. But even senior Reagan officials recognized the truth.

"When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American 'referee' had taken sides," Gen. Colin Powell wrote in his memoir, *My American Journey*. In other words, Powell, who was then military adviser to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, recognized that the actions of the U.S. military had altered the status of the Marines in the eyes of the Shiites.

(Although this "terrorism" is always blamed on Hezbollah, the group did not officially come into existence until 1985 as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon which did not end until 2000.)

Opposed to Putin

So, Trump is now on the path to wars with both North Korea and Iran, neither of

which Russian President Putin favors. Putin, who played a key role in helping President Obama achieve the Iran-nuclear agreement, now sides with the Europeans in opposition to Trump's decertification.

Putin also favors a prompt end to the Syrian conflict with the defeat of Al Qaeda and its allies, and he wants peaceful negotiations with North Korea over its desire for security against threatened American aggression. Trump is on the opposite side of all these Putin priorities.

In other words, not only does the Russia-gate hysteria have core evidentiary problems – both on the issues of “hacking” Democratic emails and claims about suspected “Russia-linked” entities paying for an infinitesimal number of ads on social media (including some about puppies and another promoting a critical documentary about Donald Trump's golf course in Scotland) – but Trump is behaving in ways that are directly contrary to Putin's desires and interests.

If indeed Clinton were right that Trump was Putin's “puppet,” then he would have agreed to negotiations to address the North Korean crisis; would have accepted constructive diplomacy toward Iran; and would have ended all U.S. support for the Syrian militants and encouraged a quick end to the bloodletting.

Instead, Trump is moving in opposite directions, lining up with Netanyahu and the neocons, whom some European allies refer to as “America's Israeli agents.” Although dressing up his capitulation to Netanyahu in tough-guy phrasing, Trump is doing what most U.S. politicians do – they grovel before Bibi Netanyahu.

And, if you have any doubts about that reality, you can watch how often both Republicans and Democrats jump to their feet when Netanyahu addresses a joint session of Congress, an honor that he has received three times, tying him with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Those moments of American humiliation – as almost all 535 members of Congress act like puppets on invisible strings – represent the actual subservience of the U.S. government to a foreign power. And that power is not Russia.

President Trump is just the latest American politician to have his strings yanked by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).

Trump Ignores Israeli/Saudi Abuses

By offering a propagandistic tirade on Iran's role in the Mideast – a classic neocon screed – President Trump has demonstrated his inability to bring any fresh or honest thinking to the regional crises, as Kathy Kelly explains.

By Kathy Kelly

Mordechai Vanunu was imprisoned in Israel for 18 years because he blew the whistle on Israel's secret nuclear weapons program. He felt he had "an obligation to tell the people of Israel what was going on behind their backs" at a supposed nuclear research facility which was actually producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. His punishment for breaking the silence about Israel's capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons included 11 years of solitary confinement.

On Friday, reading about President Donald Trump's new strategy on Iran, Vanunu's long isolation and sacrificial commitment to truth-telling came to mind. Donald Trump promised to "deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon." But it is Israel, which possesses an estimated 80 nuclear warheads, with fissile material for up to 200, which poses the major nuclear threat in the region. And Israel is allied to the nation with the world's largest nuclear arsenal: the United States.

Israel doesn't acknowledge its nuclear arsenal publicly, nor does Israel allow weapons inspectors into its nuclear weapons facilities. Along with India and Pakistan, Israel refuses to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. And it has used conventional weapons in numerous destabilizing wars, which include aerial bombing of Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank.

Vanunu, designated by Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg as the "the pre-eminent hero of the nuclear era," helped many people envision nations in the region making progress toward a nuclear weapons-free Middle East.

In fact, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jawad Zarif, spoke eloquently about just that possibility, in 2015, holding that "if the Vienna deal is to mean anything, the whole of the Middle East must rid itself of weapons of mass destruction."

"Iran," he added, "is prepared to work with the international community to achieve these goals, knowing full well that, along the way, it will probably run into many hurdles raised by the skeptics of peace and diplomacy."

Significantly, since the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" pact with Iran was

concluded in 2015, the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) has steadily verified Iran's compliance with inspections. Iran has accepted around-the-clock supervision by IAEA officials.

What's more, "Iran has gotten rid of all of its highly enriched uranium," according to [Jessica Matthews](#), writing for the [New York Review of Books](#). Matthews continues:

"It has also eliminated 98 percent of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, leaving only three hundred kilograms, less than the amount needed to fuel one weapon if taken to high enrichment. The number of centrifuges maintained for uranium enrichment is down from 19,000 to 6,000. The rest have been dismantled and put into storage under tight international monitoring.

"Continuing enrichment is limited to 3.67 percent, the accepted level for reactor fuel. All enrichment has been shut down at the once-secret, fortified, underground facility at Fordow, south of Tehran. Iran has disabled and poured concrete into the core of its plutonium reactor – thus shutting down the plutonium as well as the uranium route to nuclear weapons. It has provided adequate answers to the IAEA's long-standing list of questions regarding past weapons-related activities."

U.S. Government's Sabotage

What do the Iranians think of the U.S. government? Ordinary Iranians might well think that whatever discontent they have with their own government the U.S. is their most implacable and most immediate enemy. Invective like Trump's recent words could be a precursor of disastrous invasion. Many Iranians remember the U.S.-backed coup that ended their democracy in 1953, and they remember the fierce U.S. support given to Saddam Hussein in the brutal eight years of the Iran-Iraq war.

[Noam Chomsky](#) rightly names the U.S. "shock and awe" attack against Iraq as the greatest destabilizing force at work in the Middle East. "Thanks to that invasion," writes Chomsky, "hundreds of thousands were killed and millions of refugees generated, barbarous acts of torture were committed – Iraqis have compared the destruction to the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century – leaving Iraq the unhappiest country in the world according to WIN/Gallup polls. Meanwhile, sectarian conflict was ignited, tearing the region to shreds and laying the basis for the creation of the monstrosity that is ISIS. And all of that is called 'stabilization.'"

Trump's record of statements and of cabinet appointments suggests that regime change in Iran is a long-term goal. Despite his close Saudi ally's massive

involvement in funding and fomenting terrorism, Trump's evolving strategy for the Middle East strangely emphasizes Iranian impacts on the region, particularly regarding the conflict in Yemen.

Yemen is entering conflict-driven famine, with a correspondingly lethal cholera outbreak, making it the worst of the region's "Four Famines," now widely recognized as collectively the worst starvation crisis in the 72-year history of the United Nations.

"In Yemen," says Trump, "the IRGC, (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp), has attempted to use the Houthis as puppets to hide Iran's role in using sophisticated missiles and explosive boats to attack innocent civilians in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as to restrict freedom of navigation in the Red Sea."

But it is Saudi Arabia and its UAE ally, with crucial U.S. backing, that have been intensely bombing Yemen since 2015 and maintaining a punishing Red Sea blockade against shipments often vital to famine relief.

"The Saudi-led coalition's ships are preventing essential supplies from entering Yemen," according to an Oct. 11, 2017 Reuters report. The report goes on to assess the dire consequences, for Yemen, caused by blocking and delaying ships carrying food and medicine. It documents many cases in which vessels were thoroughly searched, certified not to be carrying weapons, and still not allowed to enter Yemen.

In a time when 20 million people face starvation, it's particularly obscene for any country to pour resources into nuclear weaponry. Mordechai Vanunu took extraordinary risks and endured incredible suffering to rescue the human species from the foolhardiness of building and maintaining nuclear arsenals.

I wonder if people worldwide can rise to a level of courage and seriousness needed to simply recognize, and then, where possible, act in response to the world's real threats. Within the U.S., can several decades of U.S. government bipartisan lying about Iran be overcome with saner, more humane narratives?

Can the threat of U.S. invasion be lifted long enough to allow Iran's people a window for once again considering democratic reforms? Silence about these issues seems ominous. But silence can be broken. We have Vanunu's courageous example. Let's not waste the precious time we have in which to follow it.

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence, (www.vcnv.org), a campaign to end U.S. military and economic wars.

Trump's North Korea Delusions

Exclusive: A combination of ignorance and rashness is making President Trump a particularly dangerous leader as he crashes ahead with a possible preemptive war on North Korea, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Trump reportedly tells an average of nearly five lies a day. He is also renowned for what Republican pundit Michael Gerson calls "his nearly complete ignorance of policy and history."

So it would be tempting – but wrong – to shrug off yet another crackpot claim that Trump made on Fox News a few days ago. Wrong because, if Trump really believes what he said, it may signal his serious willingness to start a bloodbath with North Korea that could consume millions of lives. It gives new credence to Sen. Bob Corker's recent warning that Trump could set the United States "on the path to World War III."

In an interview with Sean Hannity on Oct. 11, Trump boasted that America's ballistic missile interceptors offer, for now at least, a reliable defense against a small-scale nuclear missile launch by North Korea.

"We have missiles that can knock out a missile in the air 97 percent of the time, and if you send two of them, it's going to get knocked down," Trump asserted.

In awarding Trump's claim a maximum false rating of "Four Pinocchios," *Washington Post* fact checker Glenn Kessler called the President "totally off base," but conceded that Trump hadn't made up the claim out of whole cloth.

A few years ago, the Pentagon's program manager for the \$40 billion boondoggle known as the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system assured Congress that "the probability will be well in the high-90s today of the GMD system being able to intercept [a missile] today." In the same spirit, the head of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency boasted this May that his anti-missile missiles could "defeat any threat" that North Korea "would throw at us . . . through 2020."

The GMD currently consists of 36 interceptor missiles based at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. With more on the drawing board, they represent a huge cash cow to military contractors like Boeing and Raytheon, but they've never been shown to work reliably.

'Overstated Confidence'

Former Massachusetts Rep. John Tierney, who led a subcommittee that oversaw the GMD program, recently complained that "During hearings, Pentagon officials repeatedly overstated confidence in the program, understated technical limitations and dismissed concerns from physicists and other experts. This false sense of security persists today."

According to Kingston Reif, an expert at the Arms Control Association, "The flight test record of the system is 10 for 18 and these tests have occurred under scripted and controlled conditions – meaning the realism of the tests is limited."

"The system has only been tested once against an ICBM class target," Reif added. "Twenty of the 32 interceptors deployed in Alaska are armed with an older kill vehicle that has not had a successful test since 2008. The system has never been tested against 'complex countermeasures' that North Korea could develop to try to fool U.S. defenses."

Another arms expert, Joseph Cirincione, quipped, "We have as much chance of intercepting a North Korean missile as the president does of scoring a hole in one."

The Pentagon's own chief weapons evaluator warned recently that the GMD has at best "a limited capability to defend the U.S. Homeland" and the Government Accountability Office last year reported that the Missile Defense Agency's optimistic performance claims "have not been demonstrated."

In a follow-up report this year, the GAO flatly declared that the Pentagon's system "will not likely provide robust defense as planned."

Perils of Overconfidence

What are the consequences of President Trump believing unfounded Pentagon claims about U.S. missile defense capabilities? He might well be tempted to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea – the much discussed "military option" – confident that the U.S. homeland will be protected against a retaliatory strike.

He might further feel tempted to launch such an attack sooner rather than later, before North Korea can build up its fleet of nuclear missiles to overwhelm the GMD's alleged capabilities.

As I have previously discussed, influential Trump advisers like Sen. Lindsey Graham have been urging the President for months to unleash an all-out attack before North Korea can develop its nuclear missile capabilities.

As Graham put it, the consequences “would be terrible but the war would be over (there), wouldn’t be here. It would be bad for the Korean Peninsula. It would be bad for China. It would be bad for Japan, be bad for South Korea. It would be the end of North Korea. But what it would not do is hit America and the only way it could ever come to America is with a missile.”

Many of Trump’s other close advisers appear to agree with Graham’s premise, rather than acknowledging that America’s vast nuclear arsenal is more than sufficient to deter a North Korean attack.

National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster declared this summer that “we can no longer afford to procrastinate” while North Korea develops its nuclear forces, arguing that “classic deterrence theory” won’t work with such a brutal government.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly said Thursday, “I think I speak for the administration, that [North Korea] can simply not have the ability to reach the [U.S.] homeland.”

Trump himself declared in his speech to the United Nations in September, “It is time for North Korea to realize that the denuclearization is its only acceptable future.” He later tweeted that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was “wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.”

As conservative foreign policy analyst Daniel Larson observed, “The danger here is that Trump has defined everything except North Korean denuclearization as unacceptable, and that implies that the U.S. won’t tolerate North Korea’s continued possession of nuclear weapons. That suggests that Trump could be contemplating launching an illegal preventive war, and such a war would likely escalate to a nuclear exchange that would claim the lives of millions at a minimum. That is the trap that Trump’s irresponsible rhetoric is creating for the U.S.”

Trump’s misplaced faith in his missile defense system only heightens that risk. As arms expert Tom Collina observed in September, “If President Trump believes he can stop a missile attack, he is more likely to escalate a conflict. This is how nations stumble into unintended wars. We can just imagine the conversation where Defense Secretary Jim Mattis tries to explain to President Trump why he can’t depend on his \$40 billion anti-missile system: ‘If I have it, why can’t I use it?’”

Mattis has a duty to explain to Trump that Pentagon claims for that system are hype aimed at winning more appropriations from Congress, not facts. He has a further duty to remind the President that the consequences of war with North

Korea would be, as he once put it, “tragic on an unbelievable scale.”

The Chance for Deterrence

Mattis should also point out that a preemptive war would be as unnecessary as it would be destructive. In senior leadership meetings, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un recently described his small but growing nuclear arsenal not as an offensive force but as a “powerful deterrent firmly safeguarding the peace and security in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia” against the “protracted nuclear threats” from Washington.

In another setting, Kim added, “Our final goal is to establish the equilibrium of real force with the US and make the US rulers dare not talk about military option.”

U.S. intelligence experts believe Kim means what he says about acquiring nuclear weapons for deterrence, not for war. “Waking up one morning and deciding he wants to nuke” Los Angeles is not something Kim Jong Un plans to do, the CIA’s top Korea analyst recently said in public comments. “He wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed.”

So even if Trump buys the Pentagon’s sale pitch about missile defense capabilities, he has no reason to launch a catastrophic war to block North Korea’s nuclear missile program. But for all our sake, someone urgently needs to let Trump know that he can’t count on the U.S. homeland remaining unscathed if he does choose to start a war with a nuclear-armed adversary.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international relations and history. His recent contributions to Consortiumnews.com on Korea include “Hurtling Toward Fire and Fury,” “Risk to US from War on North Korea,” “North Korea Fears ‘Regime Change’ Strike,” “The Negotiation Option With North Korea,” and “Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis.”

Trump’s Mendacious Speech on Iran

President Trump, in decertifying the Iran-nuclear deal, trotted out all the tripe about the “world leading sponsor of terrorism” and ties to Al Qaeda. But his new policy is one of dangerous incoherence, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump's speech on Iran is the latest chapter in his struggle to reconcile his overriding impulse to denigrate and destroy any significant achievements of his predecessor with the fact that the most salient of those achievements in foreign policy— the Iran nuclear agreement or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – is working.

It is fulfilling its objective of keeping closed all paths to an Iranian nuclear weapon. As international inspectors have repeatedly determined, Iran is fulfilling its obligations under the agreement.

The struggle for Trump is more difficult on Iran policy than with the Affordable Care Act, where Trump has been using his own executive actions to destroy directly what he has denigrated. However painful his actions on health care are to American citizens who are adversely affected, there is no international multilateral agreement that direct destruction violates. With health care there are no equivalents to the adults, in the person of senior national security officials in his administration, who have been telling him what a bad idea abrogation of the JCPOA would be.

With those adults uncomfortably restraining him, Trump is turning to Congress to square the circle between impulse and reality, to do what the adults are advising him not to do, and to come up with an Iran strategy that is markedly different from what previous administrations have done.

Neither the brief boilerplate in the speech about countering Iran's "destabilizing activity" and conventional weapons development nor the paper labeled as a "new strategy on Iran" that the White House released shortly before the speech provide such a strategy. Most of the paper could have been written in either of the previous two administrations and probably in any of the previous half dozen.

Compliance Confirmed

The issue of Iranian compliance with the JCPOA is where the dissonance Trump is experiencing, in the face of the International Atomic Energy Agency's confirmation of that compliance, is most acute. Trump's speechwriters went to the usual wells that have been tapped by longtime opponents of the JCPOA who have tried to find any possible ground for claiming an Iranian violation.

There was mention of heavy water, without any mention that in the two instances in which Iran's supply of heavy water bumped up against the agreed-upon limits, Iran promptly did exactly what it is supposed to do under the agreement, which is to sell or otherwise dispose of the excess. Nor was there any mention of how, given Iran's reconfiguration of its heavy water reactor at Arak and permanent

obligation under the JCPOA not to reprocess spent fuel, the heavy water does not represent a proliferation concern.

Trump also asserted that Iran had “intimidated international inspectors,” a line which evidently hinges on some Iranian rhetorical bravado about not giving foreigners the run of their country, and which continues a theme pushed by Nikki Haley that is intended to foster the belief that Iran is denying inspectors access to suspect sites. Neither Trump nor Haley has provided a shred of evidence that there has been any such denial, or that the procedures under JCPOA for inspection of non-declared as well as declared sites are not working well.

The key to reality as far as Iranian compliance is concerned can be found in Trump’s own speech. When he announced that he was withholding certification under the terms of the legislation governing Congressional review, he explicitly said he was doing so on the basis of the clause in the legislation that does *not* pertain to Iranian compliance but instead refers to whether sanctions relief is still “appropriate and proportionate” to the benefits from the JCPOA. If the administration had genuine grounds for claiming Iranian noncompliance, Trump surely would have invoked the clauses in the law that instead refer to whether Iran is meeting its obligations.

Trump also went to the usual wells in complaining about “flaws” in the JCPOA. Also as usual, the implicit comparison was with a mythical, impossible-to-achieve pact, with no attention given to what the real negotiating possibilities were when the JCPOA was laboriously being hammered out nor what those possibilities are now.

The ‘Sunset’ Clauses

This was true, for example, of what Trump said about the “sunset” provisions. He disregarded the key considerations about these provisions, including how the most important elements of the agreement never expire and how whether such restrictions remain in place years from now will depend more on how all the parties to the JCPOA see their interests years from now (including whether the United States lives up to its commitments) than on the fine print of a past agreement.

Most important about the sunset clauses is that if the JCPOA were killed, the relevant restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities would vanish right away, not 10 or 20 years from now. This fact makes especially ironic Trump’s closing threat that if Congress doesn’t somehow come up with legislation to his liking, and other parties to the JCPOA do not – contrary to every indication those parties have been giving – bend to whatever it is Trump wants, then “the agreement will be terminated.” If he really is worried about those sunset

clauses, then this threat is akin to committing suicide because of fear of death.

The entire speech was filled with what is hoary, well-rehearsed, and well-refuted. This was true of Trump's efforts to encourage other misconceptions about the JCPOA, including the favorite one among opponents that Iran got its benefits "up front" before fulfilling most of its obligations. In fact, the reverse was true, with Iran having to dismantle centrifuge cascades, dilute enriched uranium, gut its reactor, and take most of the steps it was required to take to close pathways to a nuclear weapon before it got an ounce of additional sanctions relief.

Besides the outright falsehoods, there was hardly a syllable of recognition in the speech that what is one of the most significant nuclear nonproliferation agreements in recent years had accomplished anything at all.

The first portion of Trump's speech was a play to emotions that consisted of a recitation of bad things Iran had done through the years, dating back to the hostage crisis of almost 40 years ago and featuring terrorist attacks by Iranian-supported groups in the 1980s. One need not disagree that there were indeed many reprehensible Iranian deeds during those years to note the misrepresentations in the speech.

The Al Qaeda Fiction

Trump tried to tie Iran to al-Qaeda (evidently relying on the fact of some al-Qaeda members having been in Iran, in a status that probably was most like house arrest) and its attacks, including the attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa. That sort of linkage has as much validity as George W. Bush alleging an "alliance" between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda as one of the selling points for launching the Iraq War.

Missing from Trump's bill of historical particulars about Iranian conduct was any sense of the possibility or desirability of regimes changing their conduct – partly through evolution of their own perception of self-interest and partly through inducements, which is what the JCPOA is all about in keeping Iran from building nuclear weapons. Also missing was any reference to the responsibility of other players for much of the mayhem involved (as with the Saudi-led, U.S.-supported war in Yemen).

Missing as well was any genuine connection between all of the recited reasons to dislike Iran and a rationale for Trump undermining the JCPOA. Trump offered the usual assertions about unfrozen assets that Iran "could use to fund terrorism" while offering no reason to believe that the level of what is unfrozen has

anything to do with the level of Iran's activity outside its borders.

Trump even used the chestnut about a payment by the Obama administration to Iran in the form of pallets of cash – without mentioning, of course, that this payment was settlement of an old claim involving aircraft that Iran under the shah had ordered but the United States never delivered, and that cash was used because Iran was still frozen out of Western banking systems.

Although Trump claimed to be offering an entire new strategy on Iran and not just making a statement about the JCPOA, something else that was missing was any reason to believe that his administration has new and better ideas to do anything about non-nuclear Iranian actions, whether this involves missiles, terrorism, or anything else.

Neither in this speech nor on other occasions has Trump shown any awareness of the need to look at the reasons the other state is doing what it is doing, how this fits in with what other states are doing, and what incentives would be required to elicit any changes.

Trump referred repeatedly in his speech to the "Iranian dictatorship." There was no hint of recognition that the Iranian regime is currently one of the more democratic ones in the Middle East (and much more so than some other regimes in the region that Trump prefers to associate with). There was no acknowledgement that the JCPOA was negotiated with the government of a popularly elected Iranian president who won re-election over hard-line opposition partly because of the promise of better relations, including economic relations, with the West under the JCPOA.

The misrepresentations in the speech were too numerous to catalog entirely, but one of the biggest was Trump's assertion that "the previous administration lifted sanctions just before what would have been the complete collapse of the regime." There is no evidence whatsoever that the Iranian regime was on the brink of any such collapse.

Piling on more and more sanctions in the absence of engagement and diplomacy had merely seen the spinning of more and more centrifuges enriching uranium. This line in the speech points to the vacuity of what Trump is offering for a policy toward Iran: endless hostility and confrontation, and with it the risk of war, sustained by a baseless hope of regime change – a hope that has brought costs and chaos that the United States knows all too well.

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

Trump's War for Coal Raises Risks

Exclusive: President Trump's war for coal is threatening progress on alternative energy while creating hazards both in the weather effects from global warming and in health risks from breathing dirty air, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

When Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt proudly declared "The war against coal is over," as part of his Oct. 9 announcement of plans to repeal the Obama-era Clean Power Plan, he neglected to mention the thousands of Americans whose lives will be sacrificed so coal producers and utilities can declare victory in the nation's environmental wars.

As Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement, "Donald Trump and Scott Pruitt will go down in infamy for launching one of the most egregious attacks ever on public health, our climate, and the safety of every community in the United States. He's proposing to throw out a plan that would prevent thousands of premature deaths and tens of thousands of childhood asthma attacks every year."

Coal burning produces deadly particulates, toxic metals, and other pollutants that have a ruinous effect on public health, even with current controls on smokestack emissions. A 2015 analysis by the EPA of the Clean Power Plan, which proposed flexible measures to curb carbon pollution from power plants across the country, noted that associated cuts to smog and soot would "bring major health benefits for American families."

By 2030, when its provisions fully kicked in, the plan would result in "up to 3,600 fewer premature deaths; 90,000 fewer asthma attacks in children; 1,700 fewer hospital admissions; and avoiding 300,000 missed days of school and work."

Those numbers reflected only the projected impact of the Clean Power Plan, not the total impact of coal burning. Carnegie Mellon professor Jay Apt recently cited a vast scientific literature that supports estimates of premature deaths from U.S. power plant emissions at between 7,500 and 52,000 annually – roughly comparable to total fatalities from car crashes.

Switching electric utilities completely from coal to natural gas would slash

those emissions and lower human health costs by upward of \$50 billion a year, Apt and a team of fellow scientists calculated in a 2016 paper.

That process is already underway for economic reasons. Thanks to cheap natural gas prices, nearly half of U.S. coal-fired power plants have shut down or announced plans to retire in recent years—including nearly a dozen since Trump took office.

A recent study issued by the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University noted, “A surge in US natural gas production due to the shale revolution has driven down prices and made coal increasingly uncompetitive in US electricity markets. Coal has also faced growing competition from renewable energy, with solar costs falling 85 percent between 2008 and 2016 and wind costs falling 36 percent.”

Unless those basic economic facts change, it declared, “US coal consumption will continue its decline despite Trump’s aggressive rollback of Obama-era regulations.”

War on Renewable Energy

This March, for the first time ever, wind and solar produced 10 percent of all electricity in the United States, reflecting their growing challenge to coal and their rapidly declining cost. The Trump administration is looking for ways to reverse that trend, even if that means ending the tremendous job boom in alternative energy industries.

At EPA, besides attempting to kill the Clean Power Plan, Trump apparently hopes to roll back costly regulations of mercury emissions and coal ash from power plants by appointing former coal company lobbyist Andrew Wheeler to serve as deputy administrator of the agency.

EPA’s Pruitt has also publicly urged repeal of federal tax credits for wind and solar power – without noting that they are scheduled to disappear by 2020 and 2022, respectively, and without acknowledging that extensive federal subsidies for coal for years tilted the playing field in favor of fossil fuels. (President Trump is said by West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice to be “really interested” in providing a lavish new federal subsidy for Appalachian coal.)

Meanwhile, over at the Department of Energy, the White House has asked for cuts of nearly 70 percent in the department’s programs for renewable energy and energy efficiency, including its much-acclaimed advanced research program.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry last month asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to ram through new economic regulations favoring ailing coal and

nuclear plants. His transparent attempt to interfere with energy markets ran into determined opposition not only from wind and solar representatives, but members of the gas industry. One of Trump's own appointees to FERC objected, saying "I did not sign up to go blow up the markets."

The Interior Department has weighed in, too, with Secretary Ryan Zinke declaring during National Clean Energy Week that solar companies should stop looking for sites to produce energy on federal lands. To date, his department has approved only one solar project, compared to the 60 approved by the Obama administration over eight years.

Zinke's anti-solar stance conflicts with the opinion of two-thirds of adult Americans, who believe the United States should give priority to renewable energy over fossil fuels.

Perhaps the Trump administration's biggest threat to renewable energy is its potential support for a new ruling by the U.S. International Trade Commission, which found that cheap Chinese solar panels have hurt U.S.-based manufacturers. The Solar Energy Industry Association, the main industry lobby, has decried the ruling and warned that punitive tariffs would raise panel prices, slam the breaks on solar adoption, and cost nearly 90,000 U.S. jobs.

The ruling was also opposed by the conservative Heritage Foundation, at least two Republican governors, and a group of retired military energy experts.

"But for Trump," observed the *Washington Post's* Dino Grandoni, "the commission's decision presents a rare opportunity for him to penalize two of his favorite punching bags – China and Mexico, which was also named in the ITC ruling . . . – without Congress getting in the way." Just as important, it would allow Trump to land another blow for the coal industry.

By waging war against renewable energy industry, the Trump administration isn't just putting hundreds of thousands of good jobs at risk. In the long run, it is jeopardizing efforts to slow the pace of global warming, which has contributed to the vast scale and devastation of recent natural disasters ranging from hurricanes to fires.

Just as significant, the administration threatens to condemn to misery or death thousands of Americans who will be forced to breathe dirtier air in order to line the pockets of Trump's coal-industry supporters. By fighting for coal, Trump is waging war on our very lives.

Jonathan Marshall is a frequent contributor to Consortiumnews.com.

How Trump's Iran Decision Invites War

By decertifying the Iran-nuke deal, President Trump opts for another Mideast war of choice, but war on Iran is really the choice of Israel and Saudi Arabia wanting the U.S. to do the killing and dying, as Trita Parsi explains.

By Trita Parsi

Make no mistake: We do not have a crisis over the Iran nuclear deal. It is working and everyone from Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to the U.S. and Israeli intelligence services to the International Atomic Energy Agency agree: Iran is adhering to the deal.

But President Trump is about to take a working deal and turn it into a crisis – an international crisis that very likely can lead to war. While the decertification of the Iran deal that Trump is scheduled to announce on Friday in and of itself doesn't collapse the deal, it does trigger a process that increases the risk of war in the following five ways.

1. If the deal collapses, so do the restrictions on Iran's nuclear program

The nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) took two very bad scenarios off the table: It blocked all of Iran's paths to a nuclear bomb and it prevented war with Iran. By killing the deal, Trump is putting both of those bad scenarios back on the table.

As I describe in my book *Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran and the triumph of Diplomacy*, it was the very real danger of a military conflict that drove the Barack Obama administration to become so dedicated to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis. In January 2012, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated publicly that Iran's breakout – the time it would take from making the decision to build the bomb to having the material for a bomb – was 12 months. In spite of massive sanctions on Iran aimed at both retarding the nuclear program and convincing the Iranians that the nuclear program was too costly to continue, the Iranians aggressively expanded their nuclear activities.

By January 2013, exactly a year later, a new sense of urgency dawned on the White House. Iran's breakout time had shrunk from 12 months to a mere 8-12 weeks. If Iran decided to dash for a bomb, the United States might not have enough time to stop Tehran militarily.

According to former CIA deputy director Michael Morell, Iran's shrinking breakout time caused the U.S. to be "closer to war with the Islamic Republic

than at any time since 1979.” Other countries realized the danger as well. “The actual threat of military action was almost felt as electricity in the air before a thunderstorm,” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told me.

If nothing changed, President Obama concluded, the U.S. would soon face a binary option: Either go to war with Iran (due to pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and some elements inside the U.S.) to stop its nuclear program or acquiesce to Iran’s nuclear fait accompli. The only way out of this lose-lose situation was a diplomatic solution. Three months later, the U.S. and Iran held a pivotal secret meeting in Oman where the Obama administration managed to secure a diplomatic breakthrough that paved the way for the JCPOA.

The deal prevented war. Killing the deal prevents the peace. If Trump collapses the deal and the Iranians restart their program, the U.S. will soon find itself facing the same dilemma that Obama did in 2013. The difference is that the President is now Donald Trump, a man who doesn’t even know how to spell diplomacy, let alone conduct it.

2. Trump is planning to take on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps

Decertification is only half the story. Trump also plans to significantly escalate tensions with Iran in the region, including taking a measure that both the Bush and Obama administrations rejected: Designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. Make no mistake, the IRGC is far from an army of saints. It is responsible for much of the repression against the population inside of Iran and it fought the U.S. military indirectly in Iraq through Shia militias. But it has also been one of the most critical fighting forces against ISIS.

In real terms, the designation does not add much to the pressure the U.S. already is or can impose on the IRGC. But it ratchets things up in a very dangerous way without any clear benefits to the United States. The drawbacks, however, are crystal clear.

IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari issued a stern warning last week: “If the news is correct about the stupidity of the American government in considering the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group, then the Revolutionary Guards will consider the American army to be like Islamic State [ISIS] all around the world.” If the IRGC acts on its warning and targets U.S. troops – and there are 10,000 such targets in Iraq – we will only be a few steps away from war.

3. Trump is escalating without having any exit-ramps

Escalation is under all circumstances a dangerous game. But it is particularly dangerous when you do not have diplomatic channels that ensure that the other

side reads your signals correctly and that provide mechanisms for de-escalation. Not having such exit-ramps is like driving a car without a brake. You can accelerate, you can crash, but you can't brake.

Military commanders understand this. That's what former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen warned about prior to the Obama administration investing in diplomacy. "We've not had a direct link of communication with Iran since 1979," Mullen said. "And I think that has planted many seeds for miscalculation. When you miscalculate, you can escalate and misunderstand... 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 miscalculation which would be extremely dangerous in that part of the world."

Mullen issued this warning when Obama was president, a man often criticized for being too restrained and too unwilling to use military power. Imagine how nervous and worried Mullen must be today with Trump calling the shots in the situation room.

4. Some U.S. allies want the U.S. to fight their war with Iran

There is no secret that Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been pushing the U.S. for years to go to war with Iran. Israel in particular was not only making threats of preemptive military action itself, its ultimate aim was to convince the United States to conduct the attack on Iran's nuclear facilities for Israel.

"The intention," former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak admitted to the Israeli paper Ynet in July of this year, "was both to make the Americans increase sanctions and to carry out the operation."

While the Israeli security establishment today opposes killing the nuclear deal (Barak himself said as much in an interview with the New York Times this week), there are no indications that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has changed his mind on this matter. He has called on Trump to "fix or nix" the deal, though his criteria for how to fix the deal is so unrealistic it virtually ensures the deal will collapse – which in turn would put the U.S. on a path to war with Iran.

The only person who arguably has a worse sense of judgment than Trump is Netanyahu. After all, this is what he told U.S. lawmakers in 2002 as he lobbied them to invade Iraq: "If you take out Saddam, Saddam's regime, I guarantee you that it will have enormous positive reverberations on the region."

5. Trump's donors are obsessed with starting war with Iran

Some have suggested that Trump is pursuing the decertification of the Iran deal – in spite of the near consensus advice of his top advisors to not go down this path – as a result of pressure from his base. But there is no evidence that his base cares much about this issue.

Rather, as Eli Clifton meticulously had documented, the most dedicated force behind Trump's obsession with killing the Iran deal is not his base, but a tiny group of top Republican donors. "A small number of his biggest campaign and legal defense donors have made extreme comments about Iran and, in at least one case, advocated for the use of a nuclear weapon against the Islamic Republic," Clifton wrote last month.

The billionaire Home Depot founder Bernard Marcus, for instance, has given Trump \$101,700 to help pay Trump and Donald Trump Jr.'s legal fees following the probe into Russian election interference. Hedge-fund billionaire Paul Singer is another major donor to pro-war groups in Washington who Trump has relied upon for financial support. The most famous billionaire donor, of course, is Sheldon Adelson who has contributed \$35 million to pro-Trump Super PAC Future 45. All of these donors have pushed for war with Iran, though only Adelson has gone as far as to suggest the U.S. should strike Iran with nuclear weapons as a negotiating tactic.

Thus far, Trump has gone with the advice of these billionaires on Iran over that of his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff.

None of the above five scenarios were realistic a few months ago. They have become plausible – even likely – because Trump has decided to make them so. Just like with George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, Trump's confrontation with Iran is a war of choice, not a war of necessity.

Trita Parsi is President of the National Iranian American Council and author of Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran and the Triumph of Diplomacy. [This article first appeared at

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/5-reasons-why-trump-is-moving-towards-war-with-iran_us_59df6f8de4b0fdad73b27711?section=us_contributor

Trump's Scary Nuclear Doctrine

Pleasing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and terrifying almost everybody else, President Trump is threatening nuclear war against North Korea and, by

implication, war with Iran, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

There are acres of print analyzing “will he, or won’t he” in respect to President Trump taking military action in North Korea. And equally, volumes on what Trump may intend to do in respect of Iran: Is he engaged primarily in rhetorical “theatre” to please his base, and earn press plaudits; or is he girding up for attrition (hot or cold) against Iran?

The unanswered question is: does President Trump regard North Korea and Iran as somehow connected (albeit that Iran has no nuclear weapons, and no nuclear weapons program)? Certainly one person – one who talks to the Trump family a lot – does think the two are directly linked.

Jeffrey Sachs, who listened to Trump’s speech at the United Nations, in which the President said he was ready to “totally destroy” North Korea, tells us about the audience reaction: “Well, you could hear shuffling, chuckles, amazement, gasps, a few applause. *There was Netanyahu enthusiastically applauding.* It was a very odd scene. I am still a bit shaken by it.”

Of course, for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and some neoconservatives, a U.S. attack on the Korean nuclear program sets a wonderful precedent for Iran – for now or for the future.

We just do not know. Trump’s former career as a reality TV host has left him with a predilection for teasing and hype (“just tune in again next week, to learn more”). What is increasingly plain is that those on the inside – such as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee – are equally unsure whether President Trump is about to unleash “World War III” – or not.

We do know, however, that Trump regards himself as an expert on nuclear conflict: in an 1984 interview with the *Washington Post*, Trump said that he hoped one day to become the United States’ chief negotiator with the Soviet Union for nuclear weapons. Trump claimed that he could negotiate a great nuclear arms deal with Moscow. Comparing crafting an arms accord with cooking up a real estate deal, Trump insisted he had innate talent for this mission.

In a 1990 interview with *Playboy*, Trump said, “I think of the future, but I refuse to paint it. Anything can happen. But I often think of nuclear war.” He explained: “I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war; it’s a very important element in my thought process. It’s the ultimate, the ultimate catastrophe, the biggest problem this world has, and nobody’s focusing on the nuts and bolts of it.”

Five years on, Trump was asked where he would be in five years. “Who knows?” he replied. “Maybe the bombs drop from heaven, who knows? This is a sick world, we’re dealing here with lots of sickos. And you have the nuclear and you have the this, and you have the that.”

Foreseeing Nuclear Annihilation

Trump continued expressing the notion that nuclear annihilation could be on the horizon: “Oh absolutely. I mean, I think it’s sick human nature. If Hitler had the bomb, you don’t think he would have used it? He would have put it in the middle of Fifth Avenue. He would have used Trump Tower, 57th and Fifth. Boom.”

In another *Playboy* interview – this one in 2004 – Trump once more conveyed his nuclear despondency. He was asked, “Do you think Trump Tower and your other buildings will bear your name a hundred years from now?” Trump responded, “I don’t think any building will be here – and unless we have some very smart people ruling it, the world will not be the same place in a hundred years. The weapons are too powerful, too strong.”

During a Republican presidential debate in December 2015, candidate Trump said: “The biggest problem this world has today is not President Obama with global warming. ... The biggest problem we have is nuclear – nuclear proliferation, and having some maniac, having some madman go out and get a nuclear weapon. That’s in my opinion, that is the single biggest problem that our country faces right now. ... I think – I think, for me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is very important to me.”

“So for decades, it seems” David Corn writes in *Mother Jones*, “Trump has been haunted by the feeling that nuclear war may be inescapable. Now he is in a position to do something about the matter.”

And, as former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper remarked, “[If] in a fit of pique he [Trump] decides to do something about Kim Jong Un, there’s actually very little to stop him. ...The whole [nuclear weapons] system is built to ensure rapid response if necessary. So there’s very little in the way of controls over exercising a nuclear option, which is pretty damn scary.”

In short, should a fatalistically inclined U.S. President order nuclear tactical weapons strikes – possibly believing that nuclear conflict is somehow inevitable – there is almost nothing to stop him.

So, what might all this mean for Iran? The Iranian leadership is no more likely to know whether Trump intends to attack North Korea than Senator Bob Corker, but it must plan for the worst case – and that is, if North Korea is attacked, the case will be made by Israel, and by Iran hawks in America, that Iran will be in

a position to weaponize when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has run its course – and that this threat must be pre-empted. (This argument is something of a canard, since Iran is committed to signing the NPT's Additional Protocol – which provides for intrusive IAEA inspections – even when the JCPOA is complete).

During a meeting with military leaders earlier this month, Trump specifically linked North Korea and Iran, saying his administration was focused on “challenges that we really should have taken care of a long time ago, like North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, ISIS, and the revisionist powers that threaten our interests all around the world. ... We cannot allow this dictatorship [North Korea] to threaten our nation or our allies with unimaginable loss of life. ... We will do what we must do to prevent that from happening. And it will be done, if necessary – believe me.”

Iran's Alarm

But Iran must also prepare for the other possibility, too. Iran is not threatening the U.S. with nuclear weapons, and Trump's reference to Iran – as a regional bad actor – may be to please his base, play to American Irano-phobia generally, and to gratify a (vulnerable-feeling) Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In the latter case, Trump may hope to have his cake – and to eat it, too. He can de-certify Iran as being in non-compliance with the JCPOA. (De-certification is a purely U.S. domestic matter, which throws the burden of what to do next onto Congress. The latter must decide whether or not to re-impose the nuclear-related sanctions on Iran – after a 60-day period of cogitation. Should Congress reinstate sanctions, the U.S. would be in default on the JCPOA agreement – though the agreement would still legally stand, until and if, the United Nations Security Council should jointly, resolve otherwise).

There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that this maybe what Trump plans: to have his cake and eat it, too. The Republican majority in the Senate is wafer thin. Trump's bitter humiliation of Sen. Bob Corker, head of the Foreign Relations Committee, and someone with influence over Democratic senators, makes little sense, were he, Trump, to want Congress to threaten re-imposed sanctions on Iran – should the latter not agree either to tougher JCPOA terms, or to (separate) restrictions on the Iranian missile program.

Congress will be well aware of the difficulties – with gaining support of U.S. allies; in cajoling the U.N. Security Council; and of the U.S. global reputation for serial inconstancy. Even in Washington, it is understood that the triumvirate of White House generals is opposed to igniting a conflagration with Iran, and that Iran too, will never agree to renegotiate the JCPOA.

Indeed, Iran will want no truck with White House talks. Trump can nevertheless “spin” it as Trump, the “hard man,” while setting up Congress to be seen publicly again, as the “weak” component, buckling under the various (real) *impedimenta*. It will be difficult for Congress, nonetheless – given the wide antipathy in America towards Iran – not to sanction Iran further on whatever pretext.

These thoughts might give Iran *some* reassurance, but not much. Iran cannot count on the Europeans, whose banks and financial institutions are already succumbing to sanctions fright. Europe talks of countering any US imposed sanctions on Iran, but does it have the necessary grit?

But more significantly, the Iranian leadership will be aware that Israel is attempting to bully the U.S. into committing to “red lines” for Syria, concerning the Iranian, Hezbollah and Iraqi militia presence there – in the wake of ISIS’s defeat in Syria. Israel will be looking for those “red lines” to have the backing of U.S. military force.

For, as Israeli commentators have made plain, Israel has only limited capacity to sustain civilian casualties in any future conflict involving Hezbollah in Lebanon – let alone across an extended front of confrontation extending from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates River. There is a sense building that Israel is coaxing its “prize bull” towards intervening first, in Syria and then, secondly, in Iran.

Iran cannot count on Defense Secretary (and retired General) Jim Mattis holding the line against a new Middle East major intervention (though he is known to oppose it). Iran has no choice, it must be tough. Which is why Iran is busy constructing a new “resistance” front with Turkey and Iraq (Syria is already there) – and with building military structures of deterrence against Israel. Iran, too, has set its own “red line”: “designate the IRGC as a terrorist group, and Iran will do similar for U.S. forces” – a “red line” that permits Iran flexibility of response, depending on how it judges events. But just to be clear, unless somehow arrested, the configuration of events is converging towards new tensions across the Middle East.

All of which takes us the full circle back to our initial (Rumsfeldian) “known unknowns”: How far has Bibi Netanyahu, through his Jared Kushner conduit, convinced President Trump of the inevitability of having to take action against North Korea and Iran – and of the inexorability of the use of nuclear weapons. (During the 2016 campaign, *MSNBC*’s Joe Scarborough reported that Trump had thrice asked a national security adviser why a president couldn’t use nuclear weapons.)

We just don't know what Trump might order – and, nor it seems, does anyone else – least of all, in Washington.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.
