

Scarier than Bolton? Think Nikki for President

Nikki Haley is America's face to the international community. She is the Ugly American personified, thinking that American Exceptionalism gives her license to say and do whatever she wants at the United Nations, argues Phil Giraldi in this commentary.

By Phil Giraldi



The musical chairs playing out among the senior officials that make up the President Donald Trump White House team would be amusing to watch but for the genuine damage that it is doing to the United States. The lack of any coherence in policy means that the State Department now has diplomats that do not believe in diplomacy and environment agency heads that do not believe in protecting the environment. It also means that well-funded and disciplined lobbies and pressure groups are having a field day, befuddling ignorant administrators with their "fact sheets" and successfully promoting policies that benefit no one but themselves.

In the Trumpean world of all-the-time-stupid, there is, however, one individual who stands out for her complete inability to perceive anything beyond threats of unrelenting violence combined with adherence to policies that have already proven to be catastrophic. That person is our own Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, who surfaced in the news lately after she unilaterally and evidently prematurely announced sanctions on Russia. When the White House suggested that she might have been "confused" she responded that "With all due respect, I don't get confused." This ignited a firestorm among the Trump haters, lauding Haley as a strong and self-confident woman for standing up to the White House male bullies while also suggesting that the hapless Administration had not bothered to inform one of its senior diplomats of a policy change. It also produced a flurry of Haley for higher office tweets based on what was described as her "brilliant *riposte*" to the president.

One over-the-top bit of effusion from a former Haley aide even suggested that her "deft rebuttal" emphasizes her qualities, enthusing that "What distinguishes her from the star-struck sycophants in the White House is that she understands the intersection of strong leadership and public service, where great things happen" and placing her on what is being promoted as the short list of future presidential candidates.

For sure, neocon barking dog Bill Kristol has for years been promoting Haley for

president, a sign that something is up as he was previously the one who “discovered” Sarah Palin. Indeed, the similarities between the two women are readily observable. Neither is very cerebral or much given to make any attempt to understand an adversary’s point of view; both are reflexively aggressive and dismissive when dealing with foreigners and domestic critics; both are passionately anti-Russian and pro-Israeli. And Kristol is not alone in his advocacy. Haley regularly receives praise from Senators like South Carolina’s Lindsey Graham and from the Murdoch media as well as in the opinion pages of *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard*.

She’s Locked and Loaded

The greater problem right now is that Nikki Haley is America’s face to the international community, even more than the Secretary of State. She has used her bully pulpit to do just that, i.e. bully, and she is ugly America personified, having apparently decided that something called American Exceptionalism gives her license to say and do whatever she wants at the United Nations. In her mind, the United States can do what it wants globally because it has a God-given right to do so, a viewpoint that doesn’t go down well with many countries that believe that they have a legal and moral right to be left alone and remain exempt from America’s all too frequent military interventions.

Nikki Haley sees things differently, however. During her 15 months at the United Nations she has been instrumental in cutting funding for programs that she disapproves of and has repeatedly threatened military action against countries that disagree with U.S. policies. Most recently, in the wake of the U.S. cruise missile attack against Syria, she announced that the action was potentially only the first step. She declared that Washington was “locked and loaded,” prepared to exercise more lethal military options if Syria and its Russian and Iranian supporters did not cease and desist from the use of chemical weapons.

Ironically, the cruise missile attack was carried out even though the White House had no clue as to what had actually happened and it now turns out that the entire story, spread by the terrorist groups in Syria and their mouthpieces, has begun to unravel. Will Nikki Haley apologize? I would suspect that if she doesn’t do confusion she doesn’t do apologies either.

Haley, who had no foreign policy experience of any kind prior to assuming office, relies on a gaggle of neoconservative foreign-policy “experts” to help shape her public utterances, which are often not cleared with the State Department, where she is at least nominally employed. Her speechwriter is Jessica Gavora, who is the wife of the leading neoconservative journalist Jonah Goldberg. Unfortunately, being a neocon mouthpiece makes her particularly dangerous as she is holding a position where she can do bad things. She has been

shooting from the lip since she assumed office with only minimal vetting by the Trump Administration, and, as in the recent imbroglio over her “confusion,” it is never quite clear whether she is speaking for herself or for the White House.

She Has Her Own Foreign Policy

Haley has her own foreign policy. She has declared that Russia “is not, will not be our friend” and has lately described the Russians as having their hands covered with the blood of Syrian children. From the start of her time at the U.N., Haley has made it clear that she is neoconservatism personified and she has done nothing since to change that impression. In December 2017 she warned the U.N. that she was “taking names” and threatened retaliation against any country that was so “disrespectful” as to dare to vote against Washington’s disastrous recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, which she also helped to bring about.

As governor of South Carolina, Haley first became identified as an unquestioning supporter of Israel through her signing of a bill punishing supporters of the nonviolent pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the first legislation of its kind on a state level. Immediately upon taking office at the United Nations she complained that “nowhere has the U.N.’s failure been more consistent and more outrageous than in its bias against our close ally Israel” and vowed that the “days of Israel bashing are over.” On a recent visit to Israel, she was feted and honored by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. She was also greeted by rounds of applause and cheering when she spoke at the annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March, saying “When I come to AIPAC I am with friends.”

Nikki Haley’s embrace of Israeli points of view is unrelenting and serves no American interest. If she were a recruited agent of influence for the Israeli Mossad she could not be more cooperative than she apparently is voluntarily. In February 2017, she blocked the appointment of former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to a diplomatic position at the United Nations because he is a Palestinian. In a congressional hearing she was asked about the decision: “Is it this administration’s position that support for Israel and support for the appointment of a well-qualified individual of Palestinian nationality to an appointment at the U.N. are mutually exclusive?” Haley responded yes, that the administration is “supporting Israel” by blocking every Palestinian.

She’s Decided She Wants Regime Change

Haley is particularly highly critical of both Syria and Iran, reflecting the Israeli bias. She has repeatedly said that regime change in Damascus is a Trump administration priority, even when the White House was saying something

different. She has elaborated on an Administration warning that it had “identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime” by tweeting “...further attacks will be blamed on Assad but also on Russia and Iran who support him killing his own people.” At one point, Haley warned “We need to see Russia choose to side with the civilized world over an Assad government that brutally terrorizes its own people.”

At various U.N. meetings, though Haley has repeatedly and uncritically complained of institutional bias towards Israel, she has never addressed the issue that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians might in part be responsible for the criticism leveled against it. Her description of Israel as a “close ally” is hyperbolic and she tends to be oblivious to actual American interests in the region when Israel is involved. She has never challenged the Israeli occupation of the West Bank as well as the recent large expansion of settlements, which are at least nominally opposed by the State Department and White House. Nor has she spoken up about the more recent shooting of three thousand unarmed Gazan demonstrators by Israeli Army sharpshooters, which is a war crime.

Haley’s hardline on Syria reflects the Israeli bias, and her consistent hostility to Russia is a neoconservative position. A White House warning that it had “identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime led to a Haley elaboration in a tweet that “...further attacks will be blamed on Assad but also on Russia and Iran who support him killing his own people.” Earlier, on April 12, 2017 after Russia blocked a draft U.N. resolution intended to condemn the alleged Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, which subsequently turned out to be a false flag, Haley said, “We need to see Russia choose to side with the civilized world over an Assad government that brutally terrorizes its own people.”

Haley is particularly critical of Iran, which she sees as the instigator of much of the unrest in the Middle East, again reflecting the Israeli and neocon viewpoints. She claimed on April 20, 2017 during her first session as president of the U.N. Security Council, that Iran and Hezbollah had “conducted terrorist acts” for decades within the Middle East, ignoring the more serious terrorism support engaged in by U.S. regional allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar. She stated in June 2017 that the Security Council’s praise of the Iran Nuclear Agreement honored a state that has engaged in “illicit missile launches,” “support for terrorist groups,” and “arms smuggling,” while “stok[ing] regional conflicts and mak[ing] them harder to solve.” All are perspectives that might easily be challenged.

So, Nikki Haley very much comes across as the neoconservatives’ dream ambassador

to the United Nations—full of aggression, a staunch supporter of Israel, and assertive of Washington’s preemptive right to set standards for the rest of the world. And there is every reason to believe that she would nurture the same views if she were to become the neocon dream president. Bearing the flag for American Exceptionalism does not necessarily make her very good for the rest of us, who will have to bear the burdens and risks implicit in her imperial hubris, but, as the neoconservatives never feel compelled to admit that they were wrong, one suspects that Haley’s assertion that she does not do confusion is only the beginning if she succeeds in her apparent quest for the highest office in the land. Worse than John Bolton? Absolutely.

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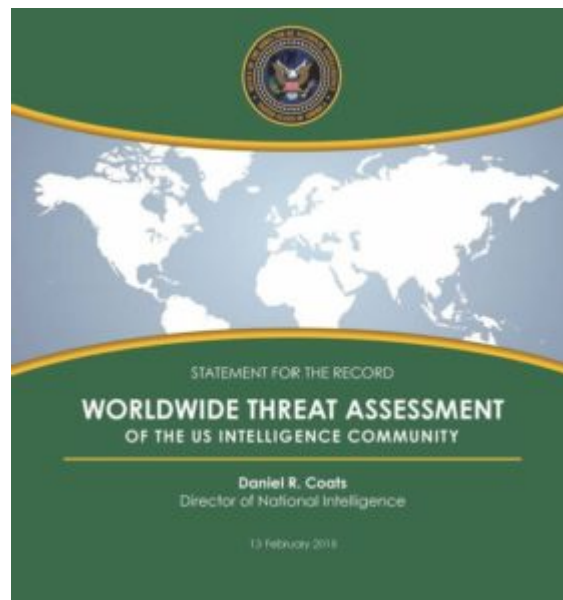
North Korea, Iran and U.S. Intelligence that Neither Hears Nor Sees

A recent Worldwide Threat Assessment issued by the U.S. intelligence community exaggerates threats posed by North Korea and Iran, ignoring well-known realities and downplaying the U.S.’s own previous intelligence assessments, notes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

On February 13, the American intelligence community issued its Worldwide Threat Assessment for 2018. It is a frightening document to read, but perhaps not for the reasons you would expect. It is not frightening for the threat to America or the world that it reveals, but rather for its failure to hear or see what U.S. adversaries say or do.

On North Korea, for example, the agencies that hear everything cannot seem to hear anything North Korea has said; on Iran, the agencies that see everything cannot seem to see what they have long known.



The Worldwide Threat Assessment is a regular ritual of the intelligence community in which it shares a declassified summary of threats to U.S. national security with Congress. The current assessment is published under the name of Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence. In theory, the assessment is the result of input from all of America's sixteen intelligence agencies.

Worldwide Threat Assessments, according to Ray McGovern, are not as important as National Intelligence Estimates, but they are not unimportant. McGovern, a former CIA analyst who prepared and briefed the President's Daily Brief for Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, explained to me that, though they are less important for shaping policy, they are no less important for shaping public perception.

When it comes to North Korea and Iran, Congress exaggerates the truth, and, according to McGovern, Worldwide Threat Assessments serves the interests of those who benefit from exaggerating the truth. When Congress misleads the public on North Korea and Iran, it can claim support from the intelligence community by referencing the Threat Assessment. Neocons and irresponsible journalists can all quote its exaggerated and unsupported claims.

North Korea

North Korea receives a scant three paragraphs. North Korea is identified as "a complex and increasing threat to U.S. national security and interests." That threat cannot be removed by negotiations, it is always said, because North Korea is not willing to negotiate away their nuclear weapons program. That is the Trump administration's justification for bypassing diplomacy or even talking with North Korea. That premise is asserted when the Worldwide Threat Analysis insists that "repeatedly stating that nuclear weapons are the basis for its survival, suggests that the regime does not intend to negotiate them away."

But the intelligence community that can hear everything you say apparently cannot hear anything North Korea is saying. The North Koreans do say that their nuclear weapons program is the basis of its survival—a deterrent—but they have repeated many versions of the formulation that if the threat to its survival were removed, the deterrent to the threat would be removed.

North Korea's position is not a refusal, it's a conditional: North Korea is not saying it will not negotiate over its nuclear program; it is saying it will not negotiate away the deterrent until there are guarantees that they no longer need the deterrent. To change North Korea's undesirable behaviour, America has to change its undesirable behaviour.

It is well known – or would be well known if the essential role assigned to historians and journalists in a democratic society had not been appropriated by propagandists – that both times the United States seriously engaged in diplomatic discussions with North Korea – in 1994 and in 2005 – when the U.S. promised to stop threatening to attack North Korea, North Korea promised to stop its nuclear weapons program.

But, it is not necessary to appeal to distant history or to previous North Korean leaders. The same conditional formulation of abandoning the deterrent when the need for the deterrent is abandoned has been articulated repeatedly in very recent history.

North Korea's Deputy Ambassador Kim In-ryong put it this way to UN Secretary-General António Guterres in August of 2017: "As long as the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat continue, the DPRK, no matter who may say what, will never place its self-defensive nuclear deterrence on the negotiating table." Ju Yong Chol, a North Korean diplomat, expressed the formulation exactly the same way.

The same conditional North Korean formulation was expressed by Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho in August of 2017. Ri said "We will, under no circumstances, put the nukes and ballistic rockets on the negotiating table. . . . unless the hostile policy and nuclear threat of the U.S. against the DPRK are fundamentally eliminated." The next month, RI Yong-ho explained to the U.N. that its nuclear program is "to all intents and purposes, a war deterrent for putting an end to nuclear threat of the U.S. and for preventing its military invasion, and our ultimate goal is to establish the balance of power with the U.S.."

Most importantly, Kim Jong Un, himself, has also expressed this conditional formulation. Kim has stated that "Our final goal is to establish the equilibrium of real force with the U.S. and make the U.S. rulers dare not talk about military options."

And despite the Worldwide Threat Assessment's assurance that "the regime does not intend to negotiate [its nuclear weapons] away," North Korea has not ceased to assure the world that it would. Investigative journalist Gareth Porter has recently reported on the possibility of an "intra-Korean" agreement between North and South Korea.

Porter says that in a South Korean proposal that has never been reported by the U.S. media, the U.S. and South Korea would "discuss reducing the South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises if North Korea suspends its nuclear weapons and missile activities." South Korean President Moon Jae-in has further suggested that the U.S. and South Korea could refrain from including aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines during their joint military exercises."

Kim Jong Un has responded in a way that suggests that this proposal satisfies the conditional formulation of North Korea's terms. He called for a détente with South Korea and requested that South Korea "discontinue all the nuclear drills they have staged with outside forces," meaning the U.S., and "refrain from bringing in nuclear armaments and aggressive forces of the United States." Separating nuclear cooperation with the U.S. during the drills from the mere existence of drills, suggests, as Porter points out, "that Kim was signaling [his] interest in negotiating an agreement along the lines that [South Korea] had raised."

The Worldwide Threat Assessment's position on North Korea is not based on real world intelligence. An intelligence community that can hear everything cannot seem to hear anything that North Korea is saying. Or it can but is using its Worldwide Threat Assessment to shape public perception in a way that serves the way the U.S. government wants the public to perceive North Korea.

Iran

Iran receives a lot more space in the Worldwide Threat Assessment than North Korea. And, although there are a number of incredible claims made in the Iran section, the most incredible claims about Iran are made in the section on terrorism. In that section, two unsupportable claims are stated as accepted fact. The first reverberates out of the Washington echo chamber: "Iran remains the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism." The second is that "Lebanese Hizballah" – which is lumped together with Iran – "has demonstrated its intent to foment regional instability by deploying thousands of fighters to Syria"

The American intelligence agencies that can see everything apparently cannot see what they have long known. They know Iran is not "the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism" for two reasons: they know it's not Iran, and they know who it really is.

This is not only because all of the recent attempts to link Iran to terrorism have failed, but because their own reports on terrorism don't list Iran as the leading state sponsor of terrorism. The State Department's Patterns of Global Terrorisms rarely identifies terrorist incidents as carried out on behalf of Iran. And, the most recent Global Terrorism Index from the Department of Homeland Security clearly states that, not Iran, but "ISIL, Boko Haram, the Taliban and al-Qa'ida" are the biggest terrorist threats. None of these four groups is Shiite and none is aligned with Iran, but combined they are "responsible for 74 per cent of all deaths from terrorism." The Index also clearly identifies "ISIL," not Iran "as the deadliest terrorist group."

The intelligence community also knows that Iran is not the leading state sponsor of terrorism because it knows that Iran's enemy, Saudi Arabia, is. As early as December of 2009, the State Department already knew that "Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban . . . and other terrorist groups." A 2012 classified Defense Intelligence Agency Information Intelligence Report that made the rounds through the US intelligence community identified the "supporting powers" of ISIS to be "Western countries, the Gulf States and Turkey."

In 2014, Vice President Biden admitted that "[O]ur allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. . . . They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis."

Point 4 of a memo written by Hillary Clinton on September 17, of the same year confesses that based on "western intelligence, US intelligence and sources in the region," the U.S. knew that "the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia . . . [were] providing clandestine financial and logistic support to Isis and other radical groups in the region." And, in 2015, President "Obama and other US officials urged Gulf leaders who are funding the opposition to keep control of their clients, so that a post-Assad regime isn't controlled by extremists from the Islamic State or al-Qaeda."

In other words, the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the American intelligence community does not reflect what the American intelligence community has known for at least eight years: Iran is not the leading state sponsor of terrorism, Saudi Arabia is.

As the intelligence community cannot see what it has long been shown about terrorism, so it cannot see what it has long known about Iran's role in the region. Iran and Hezbollah are not "foment[ing] regional instability by deploying thousands of fighters to Syria." Iran is in Syria to fight the Islamic

State and al-Qa'ida. According to the very same Worldwide Threat Assessment, "Sunni violent extremists – most notably ISIS and al-Qa'ida – pose continuing terrorist threats to US interests and partners worldwide."

So, Iran is fomenting, not regional instability, but regional stability by playing a leading role in the fight against the most destabilizing terrorist organizations in the region. The Worldwide Threat Assessment identifies al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State as destabilizing forces in the region but simultaneously identifies Iran—whose role in the region is to combat those destabilizing forces—as destabilizing.

Ever since Iran tried and failed to mediate the dispute in Syria in an attempt to avoid the conflict, Iran and Hezbollah have backed Assad against the Islamic State, al-Qa'ida and the other rebel forces. Iran's role against destabilizing forces in the region has not been a trivial one. Iran and Hezbollah have played a crucial role in defeating the rebels. For many people who are being threatened by al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State, Iran has surpassed the United States as their most important ally.

And it is not like the authors of the Worldwide Threat Assessment don't know this. Ayatollah Khamenei has authorized his top commander to coordinate military operations with the U.S., and the Israeli media reported in 2014 that Iranian F-4 Phantoms that have bombed Islamic State targets were "most likely" working in "coordination with the U.S. military." Patrick Cockburn has suggested that advances by Iranian-controlled Shia militias against the Islamic State on the ground have been made possible by coordination with U.S. airstrikes on Islamic State positions.

On both Iran and North Korea, the Worldwide Threat Assessment is a terrifying document to read – terrifying for the incompetence it reveals. The best briefing that the U.S. intelligence community can offer Congress is an assessment based on incomplete information and logical inconsistency. The ears of America cannot hear what North Korea is saying; the eyes of America cannot see what Iran is doing.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history. This article originally appeared at Antiwar.com. Reprinted with permission.

Growing Risk of U.S.-Iran Hostilities

Based on False Pretexts, Intel Vets Warn

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

February 26, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: War With Iran

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

* * *

Rhetoric vs. Reality

We believe that the recent reporting regarding possible conflict with nuclear-

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

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

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

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

Limited Military Capability

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

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

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

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

Nuclear Weapons Thwarted

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

The recent incident involving the shoot-down of a drone alleged to be Iranian, followed by the downing of an Israeli fighter by a Syrian air defense missile, resulted in a sharp response from Tel Aviv, though reportedly mitigated by a

warning from Russian President Vladimir Putin that anything more provocative might inadvertently involve Russia in the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is said to have moderated his response but his government is clearly contemplating a more robust intervention to counter what he describes as a developing Iranian presence in Syria.

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

Getting Snookered Into War

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

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

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

In sum, we see a growing risk that the U.S. will become drawn into hostilities on pretexts fabricated by Israel and Saudi Arabia for their actual common objective ("regime change" in Iran). A confluence of factors and misconceptions about what is at stake and how such a conflict is likely to develop, coming from

both inside and outside the Administration, has, unfortunately, made such an outcome increasingly likely.

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

FOR THE STEERING GROUP, VETERAN INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS FOR SANITY

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

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

Kathleen Christison, CIA, Senior Analyst on Middle East (ret.)

Graham E. Fuller, Vice-Chair, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC Iraq; Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry C. Johnson, former CIA and State Department Counter Terrorism officer

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF; ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC) (ret.)

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

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

Edward Loomis, Jr., former NSA Technical Director for the Office of Signals Processing (ret.)

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

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

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Near East (ret.)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Greg Thielmann, former Director of the Strategic, Proliferation, and Military Affairs Office, State Department Bureau of Intelligence & Research (INR), and former senior staffer on Senate Intelligence Committee (ret.)

Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA (ret.)

Lawrence Wilkerson, Colonel (USA, ret.), former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary (associate VIPS)

Sarah G. Wilton, CDR, USNR, (ret.); Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Robert Wing, former Foreign Service Officer (associate VIPS)

Ann Wright, Colonel, US Army (ret.); also Foreign Service Officer who, like Political Counselor John Brady Kiesling, resigned in opposition to the war on Iraq

A Treacherous Crossing

Paul Ryan's recent trip to the Gulf reiterated the U.S. government's support of the Saudi-led assault on Yemen and a bellicose stance towards Iran, which has created a watershed of human suffering, writes Kathy Kelly.

By Kathy Kelly

On January 23rd an overcrowded smuggling boat capsized off the coast of Aden in Southern Yemen. Smugglers packed 152 passengers from Somalia and Ethiopia in the boat and then, while at sea, reportedly pulled guns on the migrants to extort additional money from them. The boat capsized, according to *The Guardian*, after the shooting prompted panic. The death toll, currently 30, is expected to rise.

Dozens of children were on board.



The passengers had already risked the perilous journey from African shores to Yemen, a dangerous crossing that leaves people vulnerable to false promises, predatory captors, arbitrary detention and tortuous human rights violations. Sheer desperation for basic needs has driven hundreds of thousands of African migrants to Yemen. Many hope, upon arrival, they can eventually travel to prosperous Gulf countries further north where they might find work and some measure of security. But the desperation and fighting in southern Yemen were horrible enough to convince most migrants that boarded the smuggling boat on January 23rd to try and return to Africa.

Referring to those who drowned when the boat capsized, Amnesty International's Lynn Maalouf said: "This heart-breaking tragedy underscores, yet again, just how devastating Yemen's conflict continues to be for civilians. Amid ongoing hostilities and crushing restrictions imposed by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, many people who came to Yemen to flee conflict and repression elsewhere are now being forced yet again to flee in search of safety. Some are dying in the process."

In 2017, more than 55,000 African migrants arrived in Yemen, many of them teenagers from Somalia and Ethiopia where there are few jobs and severe drought is pushing people to the verge of famine. It's difficult to arrange or afford transit beyond Yemen. Migrants become trapped in the poorest country in the Arab peninsula, which now, along with several drought-stricken North African countries, faces the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II.

In Yemen, eight million people are on the brink of starvation as conflict-driven near-famine conditions leave millions without food and safe drinking water. Over one million people have suffered from cholera over the past year and more recent reports add a diphtheria outbreak to the horror. Civil war has exacerbated and prolonged the misery while, since March of 2015, a Saudi-led coalition, joined

and supported by the U.S., has regularly bombed civilians and infrastructure in Yemen while also maintaining a blockade that prevented transport of desperately needed food, fuel and medicines.

Maalouf called on the international community to “halt arms transfers that could be used in the conflict.” To heed Maalouf’s call, the international community must finally thwart the greed of transnational military contractors that profit from selling billions of dollars of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and other countries in the Saudi-led coalition. For instance, a November, 2017 Reuters report said that Saudi Arabia has agreed to buy about \$7 billion worth of precision guided munitions from U.S. defense contractors. The UAE also has purchased billions in American armaments.

Raytheon and Boeing are the companies that will primarily benefit from a deal that was part of a \$110 billion weapons agreement coinciding with President Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in May.

Paul Ryan’s Remarks

Another dangerous crossing happened in the region on January 24th. U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) arrived in Saudi Arabia, along with a congressional delegation, to meet with the monarchy’s King Salman and subsequently with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who has orchestrated the Saudi-led coalition’s war in Yemen. Following that visit, Ryan and the delegation met with royals from the UAE.

“So rest assured”, said Ryan, speaking to a gathering of young diplomats in the UAE, “we will not stop until ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates are defeated and no longer a threat to the United States and our allies.

“Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, we are focused on the Iranian threat to regional stability.”

Beyond the simple well-recorded fact of lavish Saudi financial support for Islamist terrorism, Ryan’s remarks overlook the Saudi-led coalition military assaults and “special operations” in Yemen, which the U.S. supports and joins. The war there is arguably undermining effort to combat jihadist groups, which have flourished in the chaos of the war, particularly in the south which is nominally under the control of the government allied to Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian government Ryan denounced does have allies in Yemen and may be smuggling weapons into Yemen, but no one has accused them of supplying the Houthi rebels with cluster bombs, laser-guided missiles and littoral (near-coastal) combat ships to blockade ports vital to famine relief. Iran does not provide in-air refueling for warplanes used in daily bombing runs over Yemen.

The U.S. has sold all of these to countries in the Saudi-led coalition which have, in turn, used these weapons to destroy Yemen's infrastructure as well as create chaos and exacerbate suffering among civilians in Yemen.

Ryan omitted any mention of the starvation, disease, and displacement afflicting people in Yemen. He neglected to mention documented human rights abuses in a network of clandestine prisons operated by the UAE in Yemen's south. Ryan and the delegation essentially created a smokescreen of concern for human life that conceals the very real terror into which U.S. policies have thrust the people of Yemen and the surrounding region.

Potential starvation of their children terrifies people who can't acquire food for their families. Those who can't obtain safe drinking water face nightmarish prospects of dehydration or disease. Persons fleeing bombers, snipers, and armed militias who might arbitrarily detain them shudder in fear as they try to devise escape routes.

Paul Ryan, and the congressional delegation traveling with him, had an extraordinary opportunity to support humanitarian appeals made by UN officials and human rights organizers.

Instead, Ryan implied the only security concerns worth mentioning are those that threaten people in the U.S. He pledged cooperation with brutally repressive dictators known for egregious human rights violations in their own countries, and in beleaguered Yemen. He blamed the government of Iran for meddling in the affairs of other countries and supplying militias with funds and weapons. U.S. foreign policy is foolishly reduced to "the good guys," the U.S. and its allies, versus "the bad guy," – Iran.

The "good guys" shaping and selling U.S. foreign policy and weapon sales exemplify the heartless indifference of the smugglers who gamble human life in exceedingly dangerous crossings.

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Vietnam and the U.S. 'Forever Wars'

Military planners have learned the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War, focusing on war's "winnability" rather than questioning whether to engage in it all, notes Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Setting aside for the moment President Donald Trump's animus to Barack Obama and all his works (notably the JCPOA, AKA the Iran nuclear deal), and his close attachment to Benjamin Netanyahu, much of this administration's foreign policy seems to Beltway outsiders as one that is strategically incoherent: increasing U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan (after 16 years of war); a militarized 'statelet' to be constructed in northeastern Syria; a ploy to divide Lebanon; operational collaboration with Saudi's Yemen war; and 'taking Jerusalem off the table.'

These policies all seem to be conceived with a puzzling indifference to the likelihood for U.S. failure and humiliation.

Now one military historian who served with U.S. forces in Iraq tells us in a compelling discourse that if we find it confusing, it is because we have failed to grasp the essence of what drives these policies. He explains – in a single word – what it is that we're missing: Vietnam

"It's always there," Danny Sjursen writes of the Vietnam War. "Looming in the past, informing American futures. A 50-year-old war, once labelled the longest in our history, is still alive and well; and still being refought by one group of Americans: the military high command. And almost half a century later, they're still losing it and blaming others for doing so."

More than two decades of involvement, spanning from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s and – at the height of involvement – with half a million American troops on the ground, the basic weakness was never altered, observes Sjursen.

The U.S.-backed regime in Saigon was simply unable to hold the line without American military support – and ultimately collapsed under the weight of a conventional North Vietnamese invasion, in April 1975.

"There's just one thing," Sjursen writes. "Though a majority of historians ... subscribe to the basic contours of the above narrative, the vast majority of senior American military officers do not. Instead, they're still refighting the Vietnam War."

Many of the current military leaders entered the service when military prestige was at an all-time low ebb. They came of age believing the Vietnam failure was due to political cowardice in Washington, or due to a military high command that too weak to assert its authority effectively. But none of the military analysis done by this post-Vietnam generation of officers ever addressed the basic question "about whether the Vietnam War was winnable, necessary, or advisable" from the beginning.

No, in this view, the war could, and should, have been won – if only the right approach had been pursued.

Thus, we have had “forever war” which is designed empirically to “prove” the two major military theses of the war lacunae – which if they had been properly implemented in Vietnam, instead of being neglected – would assuredly have led to an American “win.”

This revisionist history began in 1986 with an article by David Petraeus in the military journal *Parameters*, in which he argued that the U.S. army was unprepared to fight low intensity conflicts (such as Vietnam), and that “what the country needed wasn’t fewer Vietnams; but better-fought ones. The next time, he concluded fatefully, the military should do a far better job of implementing counterinsurgency forces, equipment, tactics, and doctrine to win such wars.”

One strand of military analysis (the Clausewitzian, “go-big” hypothesis), about how to “win” next time, was initiated by a Colonel Harry Summers, who suggested that “civilian policymakers had lost the war by focusing hopelessly on the insurgency in South Vietnam rather than focus on the North Vietnamese capital, Hanoi: More troops, more aggressiveness, even full-scale invasions of communist safe havens in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, would have led to victory.”

Though H.R. McMaster (the present National Security Advisor) in a 1997 book, *Dereliction of Duty*, pinned the blame rather on the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a lack of honesty in advising the President Johnson on what was needed to “win,” he agreed with Summers that “winning” required a more aggressive offensive strategy – a full ground invasion of the North, or unrelenting carpet-bombing of that country.

In this sense, he was another “go-big” Clausewitzian – and we may recognize something of this earlier intellectual framing in McMaster’s attempt in April 2017 to persuade President Trump to deploy 150,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan, as a Petraeus-style “surge.” It will be recalled also, that McMaster reportedly is the advocate for a more aggressive, military-options approach for North Korea.

The other strand – the lack of a COIN, or counterinsurgency, approach in Vietnam – was initially adopted by Colonel Krepinevich as the overarching explanation for the US military’s Vietnam failure. The definitive COIN doctrine, Field Service Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations, however, was overseen by David Petraeus, working with another officer, Lt. General James Mattis (the present Defense Secretary).

Petraeus would “famously return to Iraq in 2007,” Tom Engelhardt notes, “that manual in hand, with five brigades, or 20,000 U.S. troops, for what would become known as ‘the surge,’ or “the new way forward” – an attempt to bail the Bush administration out of its disastrous occupation of the country.”

“Such revisionist interpretations of the Vietnam experience would prove tragic in Iraq and Afghanistan, once they had filtered down to the entire officer corps,” Sjursen reflects. “All of this misremembering, all of those Vietnam ‘lessons’ inform the U.S. military’s ongoing ‘surges’ and ‘advise-and-assist’ approaches to its wars in the Greater Middle East and Africa.”

Both Vietnam revisionist schools are represented in the Trump administration and guide its version of global strategy. There are those who demand a freer hand in waging war than they had in Vietnam and there is a “hearts-and-minds” faction that consists of officers who have spent three administrations expanding COIN-influenced missions to more than two-thirds of the world’s nations. “Today’s leaders don’t even pretend that the post-9/11 wars will ever end,” notes Sjursen.

In an interview last June, Petraeus described the Afghan conflict as “generational,” raising the specter of a decades-long engagement. Speaking on PBS’ News Hour, Petraeus said:

“But this [war in Afghanistan] is a generational struggle. This is not something that is going to be won in a few years. We’re not going to take a hill, plant a flag, [and] go home to a victory parade. And we need to be there for the long haul, but in a way that is, again, sustainable. We have been in Korea for 65-plus years because there is an important national interest for that. We were in Europe for a very long period of time: Still there, of course, and actually with a renewed emphasis now, given Russia’s aggressive actions. And I think that’s the way we need to approach this.”

The analysis by Sjursen helps explain what otherwise seems to be ill-conceived actions by the US military, such as militarily to occupy (i.e. illegally) a corner of Syria (well, 40% of it really). War with Russia and Iran, it would appear, are “forever” wars – generational struggles. China is too, but that is a financial war front, principally.

McMaster said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in May 2016: “What is required to deter a strong nation ... is forward deterrence, to be able to ratchet up the cost at the frontier, and to take an approach to deterrence that is consistent with deterrence by denial, convincing your enemy that your enemy is unable to accomplish his objectives at a reasonable cost.”

That is perhaps what America's annexation of northeastern Syria is all about: ratchetting up the cost, at the frontier; a deterrence by denial (of Syrian land to Iranian forces).

Europe might like to ponder McMaster's words. For if the U.S is engaged in "generational," COIN-influenced operations against Iran, the Europeans are fighting the wrong war: Trying to appease Trump, by setting up a working group with the Americans to consider how the JCPOA can be improved, or entering into talks on ballistic missiles with Iran, is likely to achieve nothing: it will be simply subsumed into what McMaster described as the US needing to operate effectively on this "battleground of perception and information."

That is to say the Europeans will be colluding with the U.S. COIN operations being mounted against Iran.

What is less clear however, about "what's up" with U.S. foreign policy, is this: At the 2016 CSIS event, McMaster described Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine and its "annexation" of Crimea as having "punctuated" the end of the post-Cold War period, but that these were not new developments "in terms of Russian aggression."

"Of course, this is a sophisticated strategy, what Russia is employing – and we're doing a study of this now with a number of partners – that combines, really, conventional forces as cover for unconventional action, but a much more sophisticated campaign involving the use of criminality and organized crime, and really operating effectively on this battleground of perception and information, and in particular part of a broader effort to sow doubt and conspiracy theories across our alliance," McMaster outlined.

"And this effort," he continued, "is aimed really not at defensive objectives, but at offensive objectives – to collapse the post-World War II, certainly the post-Cold War, security, economic, and political order in Europe, and replace that order with something that is more sympathetic to Russian interests."

This is frankly psychotic. It reminds of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, in which the revolutionaries fearing for the soul of Russia (read America), believe that, unless the perceived threats to her are exorcised by a renewal of vigor and a pure nationalism, their country would be overwhelmed. It is a study in the fragmentation of human psyche which leads the group to see everything conspiring together, to destroy what they see to be the true soul of their homeland.

McMaster's view is presented as if America is the threatened, fragile psyche – under evil attack from all quarters. There seems to be no understanding that

these fears might be largely the projections from his own psyche (as in Dostoevsky's analysis), or that American military actions might have contributed anything to towards these antagonisms that he now identifies as threatening him, and his country; or that the dissolution of the American-shaped global order or America's dominance over the global financial system, may represent changing major underlying dynamics, that are occurring in, and of, themselves and not connected directly to Russia.

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.

Gazing at Iran Through a Distorted Glass

A truism about U.S. politics and media is that once a foreign leader or a country has been demonized everything written or said about the subject will be skewed to the negative, a rule reflecting Washington's groupthink and careerism, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes about Iran.

By Paul R. Pillar

With any country that, like Iran, has been the subject of acrimonious debate in Washington, pronouncements by American observers about events in that country have more to do with politics here than with what is going on over there. So it has been with much of the spinning and interpreting of protests in Iranian streets during the past few days. Some guidelines for intelligent, responsible, and useful commentary on those protests are in order, and applicable no matter what are the policy preferences of whoever is commenting.

The first guideline is to apply a large dose of agnosticism to the question of where the protests are heading. The future course of popular unrest in any country is inherently difficult to predict. That future depends on the vicissitudes of emotion, the complex interplay of different issues and political forces, and the especially unpredictable ways in which minor incidents can spark much larger responses. A current trajectory cannot be extrapolated into the future, partly because of the effects of decisions not yet made. In the current Iranian case, security elements of the regime have refrained so far from using most of their capability to crack down on protesters, but have strongly hinted that the capability may yet be used. Such use would change the game being played in Iranian streets, but again with much uncertainty about where things

would go from there.

Some qualities of the current protests make their future path especially unpredictable, even in comparison with the larger protests in Iran in 2009. There is no single movement with a recognizable leadership as there was with the Green Movement in the earlier disturbances. There is no single happening or trigger equivalent to the disputed presidential election in 2009. Diverse political elements have participated. It appears that some of the first protests in Mashhad were the work of hardliners apparently seeking to embarrass President Hassan Rouhani, but they were joined by economically disgruntled citizens of other political persuasions. The messages being chanted in the street also are diverse.

Domestic Economics

The diversity of the messages leads to another guideline, which is not to presume to know what is in the hearts and minds of protesters. Nor should it be presumed that what is chanted or is written on a protester's sign identifies the motivation behind the protests. American commentators who have pushed for confrontation with Iran have taken pains to point out how one theme voiced in the protests has been that resources ought to be spent back in Iran rather than for foreign adventurism. But inclusion of that message does not overturn the recurrent pattern—in country after country in addition to Iran—that, per Bill Clinton's famous observation, it is the state of a nation's economy that most determines whether political support is won or lost. Most residents of provincial Iranian cities in which protests have occurred probably care little about the Syrian civil war or the balance of forces in northern Iraq. They care instead about unemployment and a stagnant standard of living. If a slogan about foreign adventurism is consistent with the economic grievances and it sounds like a point where the regime might be vulnerable, then it gets used.

Americans ought to find this easy to understand because we have had in the United States similar dynamics between economic discontent and political themes. Donald Trump molded a winning campaign with themes such as America having allowed foreigners to take advantage of it in ways that supposedly have had economic repercussions at home. But the Rust Belt voters who were swayed by Trump's message did not really care about whether bilateral trade deals were better than multilateral agreements or whether Europeans weren't paying their fair share of NATO's expenses, let alone about U.S. refueling of Saudi warplanes bombing Yemen. They cared about unemployment and a stagnant standard of living. And if Trump loses their support it will not be because, contrary to what he said in the campaign, he has not curbed foreign adventurism and has even expanded it. It instead will be because he did not bring back jobs and improve

standards of living for working class Americans. Such dynamics are remarkably similar to what appears to be going on with much of the current popular unrest in Iran, which can be described as a working class protest in which many protesters have much in common with denizens of the Rust Belt.

Consistency is Key

Another guideline is that, however much knowledge one may or may not claim to have about what is going on in Iran, one at least should be logically (as well as morally) consistent. The protests have presented consistency challenges especially to those who have argued most strongly for confrontation with, and punishment of, Iran. The chief inconsistency is that those who have been most in favor of imposing more rather than fewer sanctions on Iran are also those who today are calling most loudly for supporting the economically disgruntled protesters in Iranian streets—who are among those most economically harmed by the sanctions.

Arguments that have long been used against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program, raise additional challenges to consistency. If the current protests are a good thing—and the aforementioned anti-Iran American hardliners seem downright excited about them—one needs to note that this is happening with the JCPOA having been in effect for two years. Wasn't that agreement, according to the agreement's opponents, supposed to have given Iran a windfall that unduly and prematurely relieved economic pressure on Tehran? The opponents try to square this circle with the notion of the regime diverting the "windfall" to foreign adventurism while making citizens suffer. This notion usually gets conveyed without any supporting data about economics and fiscal policies (and Rouhani's policies have emphasized domestic economic improvement above all else). It also raises another inconsistency. If the current protests really are as much of a regime-shaking occurrence as some American hardliners contend, wouldn't any Iranian leader with at least half a brain and a desire to stay in power use the "windfall" to buy domestic support rather than wasting it away on foreign adventurism, if that really were the choice?

By treating the protests as a vehicle for pressuring the regime to change non-nuclear policies, the American hardliners also run into inconsistency with all their prior opposition to doing any business with the Iranian regime, of which opposition to the JCPOA has been a part. If this regime is as irredeemable and thoroughly dominated by hardline fanatics as the American hardliners have repeatedly portrayed it, who could possibly emerge from such a cauldron to respond positively to street protests? Thus we get intellectual contortions such as trying to argue in the space of a single paragraph that it was a mistake

in the past to “be in the business of currying favor with the regime’s ‘moderates’ ” but that today the protests provide an occasion to “strengthen the arguments of pragmatists arguing for a change in policy”.

Regardless of whether the eventual overall outcome of the current protests is good or bad from a U.S. point of view, it would be just as mistaken for supporters of the JCPOA to claim credit for whatever good comes out of them as for opponents to make such a claim. The JCPOA needs to stand or fall based on its intended purpose, which was to close all pathways to a possible Iranian nuclear weapon. The economic under-performance that has spawned discontent in Iran, as manifested in the current protests, has multiple sources. Economic mismanagement by the regime is one. Sanctions are another, including non-nuclear sanctions that the United States keeps in place today. Moreover, even the lifting of nuclear sanctions has not brought much of the hoped-for economic benefit to Iran, given uncertainty in the private sector—uncertainty the Trump administration has vigorously stoked—about the future of the JCPOA, with the private sector knowing of the U.S. Treasury’s ability to punish even non-American businesses for any future sanctions transgressions. The Rouhani government also probably raised Iranian economic expectations to an unreachable level as it worked to sell the agreement over hardline Iranian opposition.

Dangers of Foreign Interference

Another guideline for American commentators of any persuasion is to be mindful that such commentary is not only part of an American debate but also is heard by Iranian ears. This includes ears in the regime, where, as with regimes everywhere, the perception that a foreign government is trying to overthrow you is a big disincentive to doing any business with that government or trusting its promises. Also listening are the protesters and other citizens of Iran. Regardless of the sympathy we have for them, American expressions of support will not be fuel for keeping the protests going. No would-be protester will go out in the street and risk arrest or worse because some U.S. leader encouraged him to do so.

The much more likely hazard is to taint Iranian opposition with the stain of foreign involvement. For any Iranian movement, a perception that the United States put it up to whatever it is doing is a political kiss of death. Those in the United States urging a more active encouragement of the protests dismiss this hazard by saying, “No matter what we say and do, the regime will seek to blame the United States for the protests.” Of course it will; that’s the sort of accusation almost any regime in such a situation will make. But that’s beside the point. What matters is whether the United States makes such accusations appear credible, in the eyes of Iranians in the street and Iranians

in general, by what it does and what it says.

Certainly there is a role for declaring strong support for the right of Iranians or any other people to express their grievances peacefully, and for condemning any use of force against such expression. The line between such declarations and a posture that gives credibility to the Iranian regime's accusations about foreign interference is admittedly thin. But the line exists, and Americans do no favors to the Iranian people by crossing it.

Finally, as the events in Iranian streets have gotten regime change juices flowing again back in the United States, those feeling the flow need to be careful what they wish for. They should bear in mind how hardliners apparently were in the forefront of getting the current protests going. They also should think about the likelihood that the Iranian politics and policies that would follow any harsh crackdown on protesters—which is still one of the possible next chapters in the current events—would likely be at least as unfavorable to U.S. interests as what Tehran exhibits now. In other words, change can be a change for the worse rather than for the better.

Also worthy of reflection is the absence of Green Movement-style leadership of the current protests, and more broadly of a credible alternative leadership for the nation that would be better than what Rouhani represents. The paucity of attractive alternatives for Americans to latch on to is demonstrated by how many otherwise sane U.S. political figures have latched on to the terrorist-group-cum-cult known as the Mujahedin-e Khalq, which has little support inside Iran.

Even if a more attractive leadership were in the wings, the history of revolutions worldwide shows how frequently a moderate figure becomes an Alexander Kerensky, who gives way to more extreme and ruthless elements who hold power much longer. Iran itself has had its Kerenskys, in the persons of Mehdi Bazargan and Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, briefly-tenured leaders after the fall of the shah who lost out to the forces of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

If all this were not enough to give pause, there are more recent lessons in Iraq, where U.S.-fomented regime change boosted the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Libya, which is still divided and chaotic.

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Erasing Obama's Iran Success

The nihilism of modern American politics extends globally with one side seeking to destroy any positive legacy of the other, as the Trump administration continues its drive to sabotage President Obama's successful Iran nuclear accord, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Those wishing to kill the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program, have never given up. The agreement's ever-lengthening successful record, now more than two years old, of keeping closed all possible pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon ought to have discouraged would-be deal-slayers. But the slayers got a new lease on life with the election of Donald Trump, who, as part of his program of opposing whatever Barack Obama favored and destroying whatever he accomplished, has consistently berated the JCPOA.

The themes that the agreement's opponents push are now familiar. One of those themes is that the Obama administration was over-eager to get the agreement and consequently gave up the store to conclude the accord. This argument never made sense, given the terms of the JCPOA. The asymmetries in the agreement go against the Iranians, who came under a more intrusive nuclear inspection arrangement than any other country has ever willingly accepted, and who had to fulfill almost all of their obligations to break down and set back their nuclear program before gaining an ounce of additional sanctions relief. But the argument has had the attraction for the opponents of not being directly disprovable as far as any mindset of former officials is concerned, and of jibing with the opponents' further theme of a mythical "better deal" that supposedly was there for the taking.

An additional theme from the opponents has been that the JCPOA fails to address other Iranian policies and actions that have ritualistically come to be labeled as nefarious, malign, destabilizing behavior (NMDB). This argument hasn't made sense either, given that it was clear from the outset of negotiations that no agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program would be possible if the parties negotiating the agreement dumped onto the table their other grievances against each other. Any such futile expansion of the negotiating agenda would have meant that the Iranian nuclear program would have advanced ever closer to the capability of making a bomb *and* there still would have been the NMDB.

Nonetheless, the theme has been a favorite of opponents because it distracts attention from the success of the JCPOA in preventing an Iranian nuke, because

there always will be some sort of objectionable Iranian action that can be pointed out, and because the NMDB mantra has now been chanted so much that it has come to be accepted as an unquestioned given.

Josh Meyer recently offered a variant on these themes with an extended [article](#) in *Politico* under the tantalizing title, “The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook”. The attention-getting theme that the author pushes is that a task force of the Drug Enforcement Administration investigating drug trafficking and other criminal activity of Lebanese Hezbollah was stymied by “the White House’s desire for a nuclear deal with Iran”. Unsurprisingly, this theme has been replayed by the usual players dedicated to bashing the JCPOA or anything Obama-related, such as the *Wall Street Journal* [editorial writers](#). Some [Republicans in Congress](#) and even [Eric Trump](#) have echoed the theme.

The 13,000-word article aims to overwhelm with detail. Through the sheer volume of leads, tips, suspicions, and genuine facts, the reader gets the impression of a thoroughly reported piece. And Meyer clearly put a lot of work into it. But as Erik Wemple of the *Washington Post* points out in an [article](#) about the article, Meyer never produces any direct evidence that the White House intentionally impeded the task force’s work, much less that any such interference had to do with the impending nuclear agreement. After wading through all the detail, the careful reader can see that the attention-getting thesis about the Obama administration supposedly sacrificing drug and crime enforcement on the altar of the nuclear agreement rests on suspicion and innuendo. It rests on statements such as that some decisions about the Hezbollah case “might have been influenced” by an inter-agency group’s awareness of the nuclear negotiations—meaning that, as Wemple notes, the decisions just as easily might not have been influenced by such awareness.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration took numerous tough sanctions and law enforcement actions against Hezbollah, both before and after conclusion of the JCPOA. Meyer includes in his article—and give Meyer credit for this inclusion—statements by former Obama administration officials alluding to those actions. The very separation of the nuclear file from other grievances by or against Iran—which, as noted above, was essential to concluding any nuclear agreement at all—implied that there would *not* be any moratorium on enforcement actions against Iran’s Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Meyer’s piece suffers from a sourcing problem in that it relies heavily on just two sources who currently are employed by, or affiliated with, organizations in the forefront of opposing the JCPOA. One of those sources, David Asher, is on an advisory board of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has become mission control for undermining and trying to kill the nuclear agreement.

Whether or not such institutional connections affected what was told to Meyer, the account of a task force within DEA that felt frustrated that the rest of the government did not run fast and run automatically with whatever case it was building has the familiar ring of something that happens regularly, and quite properly and understandably, inside government. Such happening need not have anything to do with White House interference or with any pending international agreement such as the JCPOA. When a team of officials works hard on a project—as this team in DEA that was investigating some of Hezbollah’s activities undoubtedly did—its members naturally will feel frustrated by any inter-agency review that keeps the government from acting fully and immediately on whatever the team came up with (by, say, quickly filing a criminal indictment in federal court). Such review is vital. Typically there are not just one but several important national interests and equities that need to be considered, and that go beyond what the more narrowly focused team members would have had in mind.

In the case of Hezbollah and drug-running, those other considerations would have included such things as the possibility of violent responses, the cost of possibly losing sources of information on the group being investigated, and the legal soundness of any criminal case brought to court. Some of these considerations get misleadingly presented in Meyer’s article as if they were part of some Obama administration effort to put brakes on legal actions against Hezbollah for the sake of preserving the nuclear agreement. For example, former counterterrorism adviser Lisa Monaco is said to have “expressed concerns about using RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] laws against top Hezbollah leaders and about the possibility of reprisals”. As the *Post*’s Wemple observes, “ ‘Expressing concerns’ about certain law enforcement strategies may have been Monaco’s way of, like, using her governmental experience to sharpen U.S. policy, rather than working as the cog in an alleged plot to take it easy on Hezbollah.”

Beyond the multiple severe weaknesses in Meyer’s argument about what the Obama administration did or did not do are two important pieces of context that he never addresses. One concerns just what difference a more aggressive campaign against Hezbollah during the period in question, even if it were possible, would have made. Meyer makes it sound as if doing or not doing everything that this one task force in DEA wanted to do was the difference between crippling or not crippling a grave security threat. In an [interview on NPR](#), Meyer asserted that the Obama administration “did allow a group that was a regionally focused militia-slash-political organization with a terrorist wing to become a much more wealthy global criminal organization that has a lot of money that can now be used to bankroll terrorist and military actions around the world.” No, it didn’t. Even if one were to believe everything that Meyer’s piece insinuates

about an alleged White House obstructionist operation motivated by nuclear negotiations, this would not have made Hezbollah “a much more wealthy” organization, much less have made it more likely to conduct terrorist and military actions “around the world”.

Hezbollah has been in existence for more than three decades. During that time it has grown into a strong and multifaceted organization, including being recognized as a major political movement, with seats in the Lebanese parliament and portfolios in the Lebanese government. Money-making criminal operations have long been a part of Hezbollah’s activity, and investigations and legal action—through several U.S. administrations—have long been a part of the U.S. response to that activity. What one disgruntled team in DEA wanted to do during one administration was a minor episode in this story, not the make-or-break development that Meyer portrays it as.

Another piece of context applies to the whole theme, of which Meyer’s article is one manifestation, about the Obama administration supposedly drooling over a prospective nuclear agreement with Iran and giving it priority over everything else. It wasn’t Obama who gave the specter of an Iranian nuclear weapon overriding priority. It was other people who did that, and especially people who today lead the charge for aggressive confrontation with Iran and for killing the JCPOA. Well before the negotiations that would lead to the JCPOA ever began, the rallying cry of these forces was that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be one of the gravest dangers the United States ever faced. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney identified this possibility as the single most serious security threat against the United States. Most prominent among the alarmists was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made sure the whole world would understand his dumbed-down message by displaying a cartoon bomb before the United Nations General Assembly. It was only after the JCPOA closed all possible avenues to an Iranian nuclear weapon—and drained Netanyahu’s Looney Tunes bomb in the process—that we started hearing from the same forces more about how the JCPOA supposedly is bad because it doesn’t address other nefarious Iran-related activity. Activity such as drug-running by Hezbollah.

Imagine that everything Meyer’s piece says or implies were true. Imagine that the Obama administration really did see a choice between getting the JCPOA and cracking down on Hezbollah’s criminal activity. And imagine that the Obama administration said “yes” to everything that gung-ho team in DEA may have wanted to do. Then presumably the administration also would have to say, “Well, yes, we did have a chance to negotiate an agreement that would prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, but we thought a drug bust was more important.” How would the alarmists, who had been ringing the alarm bell so long and hard about an Iranian

nuclear weapon, react to that? We can be confident the reaction would not be to express compliments to Mr. Obama.

The gross inconsistency of those opposing the JCPOA reflects how their real objectives have little to do with the terms of the agreement or how it was negotiated. Their objectives have more to do with not wanting anyone to have any agreement with Iran on anything (Netanyahu's objective, while he portrays Iran as the sole source of everything bad in the Middle East), or about staying in step with American supporters of Netanyahu's government, or about not wanting any of Barack Obama's accomplishments to survive.

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 National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Intel Vets Tell Trump Iran Is Not Top Terror Sponsor

A group of U.S. intelligence veterans urges President Trump to stop his administration's false claims about Iran being the leading state sponsor of terrorism when U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia, are clearly much guiltier.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: Is Iran the "World's Leading Sponsor of Terrorism?"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/BACKGROUND

We are concerned by recent strident and stark public statements from key members of your Administration that paint Iran in very alarmist terms. The average American, without the benefit of history, could easily be persuaded that Iran poses an imminent threat and that there is no alternative for us but military conflict.

We find this uncomfortably familiar territory. Ten years ago former President George W. Bush was contemplating a war with Iran when, in November of 2007, intelligence analysts issued a formal National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) debunking the prevailing conventional wisdom; namely, that Iran was on the verge

of getting a nuclear weapon. The NIE concluded that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear weapon in 2003.

Recalling this moment in his memoir, *Decision Points*, President Bush noted that the NIE's "eye-popping" intelligence findings stayed his hand. He added this rhetorical question: "How could I possibly explain using the military to destroy the nuclear facilities of a country the intelligence community said had no active nuclear weapons program?"

We believe that you are facing a similar situation today. But instead of an inaccurate claim that Iran has nuclear weapons, the new canard to justify war with Iran is the claim that Iran remains the "world's leading state sponsor of terrorism." This is incorrect, as we explain below.

* * *

One of the recurring big bipartisan lies being pushed on the public with the enthusiastic help of a largely pliant media is that Iran is the prime sponsor of terrorism in the world today.

In the recent presentation of your administration's National Security Strategy for 2018, the point is made that:

"Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, has taken advantage of instability to expand its influence through partners and proxies, weapon proliferation, and funding. . . . Iran continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence in the region, causing grievous harm to civilian populations."

Those sentiments are echoed by several other countries of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, for example, declared in October 2015 that: Iran "is the biggest sponsor of terrorism in the world, and it is working on destabilizing the region."

The Saudi foreign minister conveniently declined to mention that 15 of the 19 terrorists who hijacked planes and attacked America on 11 September 2001 were Saudis, not Iranians. And, while Iran was an active promoter of terrorism two decades ago, it is no longer in the forefront of global terrorism. Ironically, that dubious distinction now goes to Iran's accusers – first and foremost, Saudi Arabia.

The depiction of Iran as "the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism" is not supported by the facts. While Iran is guilty of having used terrorism as a national policy tool, the Iran of 2017 is not the Iran of 1981. In the early days of the Islamic Republic, Iranian operatives routinely carried out car bombings, kidnappings and assassinations of dissidents and of American citizens.

That has not been the case for many years. Despite frequent claims by U.S. officials that Iran is engaged in terrorism, we simply note that the incidents recorded annually in the U.S. Department of State's Patterns of Global Terrorism rarely identifies a terrorist incident as an act by or on behalf of Iran.

Iran's relationship with Hezbollah also has evolved radically. In the early years of the Islamic Republic, Hezbollah was often a proxy and sub-contractor for Iran. But during the last 20 years Hezbollah has become an entity and political force in its own right. It fought Israel to a standstill in 2006 in southern Lebanon, which was a watershed moment in establishing Hezbollah's transformation into a conventional army. In the intervening years, Hezbollah, which is now part of the Lebanese government, also has turned away from the radical, religious driven violence that is the hallmark of the Sunni extremists, like ISIS.

Iran's Asymmetrical Response

After Iran fell under the rule of the Ayatollah in 1979 terrorism, its role in high profile terrorist attacks, such as the taking of U.S. hostages and the bombings of the U.S. Embassy and the Marine barracks in Lebanon, fed understandable U.S. animosity towards Iran. But Iran's actions were not driven primarily by blind hatred or radical religious views. For Iran terrorism was a way to punch back against more powerful foes, principally the United States, which was providing military and intelligence support to Iran's neighbor and enemy, Iraq.

The Iranians were also pragmatic and had direct dealings with Israel. During the early days of the Iranian revolution the Mullahs, despite publicly denouncing Israel, happily accepted secret military support from the Israelis. Israel was equally pragmatic. The Israeli leaders ignored the Mullahs and gave the support as a means of helping counter the threat posed by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. A classic case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The public image of Iran as a hotbed of fanatical terrorists has been usurped since the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in east Africa by Al Qaeda and other radical Sunni entities. The U.S. Government's own list of terrorist attacks since 2001 shows a dramatic drop in the violence carried out by Iran and an accompanying surge in horrific acts by radical Sunni Muslims who are not aligned with Iran. The latest edition of the Global Terrorism Index, a project of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, shows that four groups accounted for 74 percent of all fatalities from terrorism in 2015 – Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and ISIS.

Thirteen of the 14 Muslim Groups identified by the U.S. intelligence community

as actively hostile to the US are Sunni, not Shia, and are not supported by Iran:

- ISIS (Sunni)
- The Al-Nusra Front (Sunni)
- Al-Qa'ida Central (Sunni)
- Al-Qa'ida in Magheb (Sunni)
- Al-Qa'ida in Arabian Peninsula (Sunni)
- Boku Haram (Sunni)
- Al-Shabbab (Sunni)
- Khorassan Group (Sunni)
- Society of the Muslim Brothers (Sunni)
- Sayyaf Group in the Philippines (Sunni)
- Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Sunni)
- Lashgar i Taiba (Sunni)
- Jemaa Islamiya (Sunni)
- Houthis (Shia)

The last major terrorist attack causing casualties that is linked to Iran was the July 2012 bombing of a bus with Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. That departure from Iran's more recent policy on terrorism was retaliation for what Iran perceived to be Israel's role in assassinating five Iranian scientists involved with Iran's Nuclear program, between January 2010 and January 2012 (the dates and names of those attacked are appended).

One can easily imagine the outrage and lust for revenge that would sweep the U.S., if Americans believed a foreign country sent operatives into the United States who in turn murdered engineers and scientists working on sensitive U.S. defense projects.

Special Operations

There have been other terrorist attacks inside Iran bearing the handprint of support from the United States. Author Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, which details the history of operations carried out by U.S. Joint Special Operations

Command (JSOC) over the past 30 years, sheds light on this uncomfortable truth:

“JSOC personnel also worked with the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK), a militant Iranian exile group that had based itself in Iraq after falling afoul of the ayatollahs’ regime in Tehran. The State Department had placed the MEK on its list of designated terrorist organizations, but that didn’t stop JSOC from taking an attitude of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” toward the group. “They were a group of folks that could transit the border, and they were willing to help us out on what we wanted to do with Iran,” said a special operations officer.”

The MEK were classified as a terrorist group, until the United States decided that as long as the MEK would help kill Iranians rather than Americans, that they were no longer terrorists. The MEK’s history of terrorism is quite clear. Among more than a dozen examples over the last four decades these four are illustrative:

- During the 1970s, the MEK killed U.S. military personnel and U.S. civilians working on defense projects in Tehran and supported the takeover in 1979 of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.
- In 1981, the MEK detonated bombs in the head office of the Islamic Republic Party and the Premier’s office, killing some 70 high-ranking Iranian officials, including Iran’s President, Premier, and Chief Justice.
- In April 1992, the MEK conducted near-simultaneous attacks on Iranian embassies and installations in 13 countries, demonstrating the group’s ability to mount large-scale operations overseas.
- In April 1999, the MEK targeted key military officers and assassinated the deputy chief of the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff.

Despite this history, a bipartisan parade of prominent U.S. political and military leaders has lobbied on behalf of MEK and has been well compensated in return.

Benighted Policy So Far

In the ultimate ironic turn, the U.S.-led 2003 war in Iraq played a critical role in Iran’s resurgence as a regional power. Saddam Hussein was replaced by Shia muslims who had received sanctuary in Iran for many years and Baathist institutions, including the Army, were taken over by Iraqis sympathetic to Tehran.

Iran has come out ahead in Iraq and, with the 2015 nuclear agreement in place, Iran’s commercial and other ties have improved with key NATO allies and the other major world players—Russia and China in particular.

Official pronouncements on critical national security matters need to be based on facts. Hyperbole in describing Iran's terrorist activities can be counterproductive. For this reason, we call attention to Ambassador Nikki Haley's recent statement that it is hard to find a "terrorist group in the Middle East that does not have Iran's fingerprints all over it." The truth is quite different. The majority of terrorist groups in the region are neither creatures nor puppets of Iran. ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra are three of the more prominent that come to mind.

You have presented yourself as someone willing to speak hard truths in the face of establishment pressure and not to accept the status quo. You spoke out during the campaign against the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as a historic mistake of epic proportions. You also correctly captured the mood of many Americans fatigued from constant war in far away lands. Yet the torrent of warnings from Washington about the dangers supposedly posed by Iran and the need to confront them are being widely perceived as steps toward reversing your pledge not to get embroiled in new wars.

We encourage you to reflect on the warning we raised with President George W. Bush almost 15 years ago, at a similar historic juncture:

"after watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic."

APPENDIX

LIST OF IRANIAN SCIENTISTS ASSASSINATED IN IRAN

January 12, 2010: Masoud Alimohammadi, Iranian Physicist:

Killed by a car bomb. The perpetrator reportedly confessed to having been recruited by Israeli intelligence to carry out the assassination.

November 29, 2010: Majid Shahriari, Iranian nuclear scientist:

Killed by a car bomb. According to German media, Israel was the sponsor.

November 29, 2010: Assassination attempt on Fereydoon Abbasi Iranian nuclear scientist:

Wounded by a car bomb.

July 23, 2011: Darioush Rezaeinejad, Iranian electrical engineer, unclear scientist

Killed by unknown gunmen on motorcycle. Specialist on high-voltage switches – a key component of nuclear warheads. Assassinated by Israeli intelligence, according to the German press.

January 11, 2012: Mostafa Ahmadi-Roshan, Iranian nuclear scientist

Killed at Natanz uranium enrichment facility by a magnetic bomb of the same kind used in earlier assassinations of Iranian scientists.

Signed:

Richard Beske, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

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

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) and Division Director, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research

Bogdan Dzakovic, Former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security, (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Larry C. Johnson, former CIA and State Department Counter Terrorism officer

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF (Ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

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

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Edward Loomis, NSA, Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

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

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Near East, CIA and National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Torin Nelson, former Intelligence Officer/Interrogator (GG-12) HQ, Department of the Army

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Greg Thielmann – Former director of the Strategic, Proliferation, and Military Affairs Office of the State Department's intelligence bureau (INR) and former senior staffer on the Senate Intelligence Committee

Kirk Wiebe – former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

Lawrence Wilkerson, Colonel (USA, ret.), Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary (associate VIPS)

Sarah G. Wilton, CDR, USNR, (Retired)/DIA, (Retired)

Robert Wing – former Foreign Service Officer (associate VIPS)

Ann Wright, Col., US Army (ret.); Foreign Service Officer (who resigned in opposition to the war on Iraq)

Trump's Misuse of Intelligence on Iran

Bowing to Israeli-Saudi desires, the Trump administration is abusing the U.S. intelligence process to whip up a war fever against Iran, much like George W. Bush did on Iraq, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The most widely remembered episode of a U.S. administration using an intelligence-based public presentation to stir up hostility toward a country with which it was intent on picking a fight was Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation on Iraq to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003.

That presentation and the Bush administration's year-long campaign, of which Powell's speech was a part, to sell the U.S. invasion of Iraq represented a misuse of intelligence – less because of the substance than because of the whole nature and purpose of the exercise. Instead of using intelligence for its proper purpose of informing policy decisions yet to be made, this campaign was instead a selective and tendentious use of intelligence to sell a decision already made.

There was substantive misrepresentation, to be sure. The portion of the speech

about terrorist ties was designed to foment a belief about supposed alliances that was contrary to the judgments of the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if everything in the speech about weapons of mass destruction has been valid, the speech missed the most important questions about U.S. policy toward Iraq. These questions included what would warrant the launching by the United States of a major war of aggression, and what the ensuing mess and repercussions would be, in Iraq and in the region, after Saddam Hussein was ousted, WMD or no WMD.

Now Nikki Haley has provided the closest replication yet of the notorious show-and-tell from 2003. She has tendentiously and selectively brandished pieces, including physical pieces, of intelligence to stir up hostility toward Iran, with which the Trump administration seems intent on picking a fight.

The featured piece consisted of remnants of a missile fired from Yemen in the direction of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Haley and the Trump administration have gone beyond Powell and the Bush administration in dragging U.S. intelligence agencies into their hostility-selling campaign.

For Powell's speech, the imprimatur of the intelligence community was symbolized by Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet sitting in the camera frame right behind Powell. Although Haley is the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, such an image in the Security Council chamber evidently wasn't enough. Instead, she did her show-and-tell at the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington. And rather than a small vial that Powell used as a prop in talking about a biological weapon, she displayed a warehouse full of wrecked hardware, including the missile remnants.

Distorting Reality

Just as in 2003, the show missed the fundamental issues involved in the relevant Middle Eastern mayhem. The missile fired at Riyadh was a rather feeble and ineffective response to the continuing air assault on Yemen by a Saudi-led coalition that has turned a civil war sparked by tribal disgruntlement into one

of the world's biggest current humanitarian disaster



According to the United Nations and other sources, more than 5,000 civilians have been killed, along with the thousands of injuries and other deaths as well as related consequences such as a cholera epidemic that has killed thousands more. The Saudi-led air war is clearly the biggest source of the carnage.

The United States aids that air war. The exact nature and extent of the assistance are unclear, but what is publicly acknowledged includes U.S. provision of targeting information and refueling of Saudi warplanes. The Trump administration reportedly has considered increasing the military assistance to Saudi Arabia, including possible resumption of shipments of guided missiles that the Obama administration had suspended because of the indiscriminate Saudi targeting of civilians.

It is both misguided policy and morally offensive for Haley to try to focus attention on Iranian-related markings on a missile fragment while her own government abets far more suffering and destruction in the same war of which that missile was a part.

On the very day that Haley was showcasing Iran-related munitions came news that one of the latest aerial attacks by the Saudi-led coalition destroyed a prison in the capital Sanaa and killed at least 30 people, most of whom were detainees in the prison. And on the day that Haley was drawing attention to her warehouse full of arms that, in her words, "include parts made in Iran, some by Iran's government-run defense industry" came reports of how many U.S.- and Saudi-supplied arms wound up in the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS). Evidently a factory marking on a munition is supposed to constitute a case for condemnation of the country of manufacture when Iran is involved, but not when another state is, or at least when the United States or Saudi Arabia is.

Haley's remarks at the show-and-tell did nothing to explain how the munitions

displayed around her demonstrate anything about either Iranian policies or the drivers of conflict and instability in the Middle East, much less about implications for U.S. policy. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had handed over the materiel, and U.S. officials either would not or could not say where much of it had been recovered. Nor could they say when the weapons had been supplied or when they were used. To use such military detritus as a basis for conclusions about what Iran is or is not contributing to violence in the Middle East makes little more sense than holding Mikhail Kalashnikov responsible for all attacks in which AK-47s have been used.

Dirty U.S. Hands

Officials of the United States – the world's leading exporter of arms – ought to be especially careful about suggesting that factory markings on munitions equate to evidence about a country's foreign policy, given how U.S.-origin arms have been used even by the likes of ISIS.

Haley's comments were more telling about the nature of what the Trump administration is trying to do with such displays. She talked about going to "great lengths" to declassify "evidence" and said, "As you know, we do not often declassify this type of military equipment recovered from these attacks."

That's right, we do not. And the administration's upending of normal procedures for the sake of the public hostility-stoking campaign shows how far removed any of this is from a healthy and proper use of intelligence services.

Haley grossly mischaracterized a new United Nations report on implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231, which is the international community's official endorsement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program. She made it sound as if there were united international backing for her blame-everything-on-Iran message, saying, "In its strongest language yet, the Secretary-General's report describes violation after violation of weapons transfers and ballistic missile activity."

Haley knows well that the only obligations that Iran undertook in either the JCPOA or the U.N. resolution that endorsed the agreement concern nuclear activities. The reference in Resolution 2231 to missiles was intentionally and carefully worded as a "call" that entails no additional obligation.

The Secretary-General's report, like most such U.N. documents, is more a compilation of reports and assertions by member countries than the reaching of any grand conclusion. A U.N. monitoring committee did investigate missile firings by the Houthi forces in Yemen earlier this year and expressed agnosticism about who was involved in supplying the weapons, even though they

appeared to be of Iranian design and manufacture.

The monitors also stated they saw no evidence of something else Haley has suggested, which was a presence of Iranian missile specialists within Yemen. In the international scrutiny that matters most in assessing Iran's compliance with its obligations, the International Atomic Energy Agency continues to certify that Iran is meeting its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who must have cringed when seeing Haley's remarks, spoke to some of the same subjects on the day of Haley's presentation. Guterres repeated his endorsement of the JCPOA as "the best way" to ensure that Iran's nuclear program stays peaceful, while expressing concern about how President Trump's withholding of certification to Congress in October had created "considerable uncertainty" about the future of the agreement.

Scare tactics were a big part of the Bush administration's campaign of selling its war, with the brandishing of things like vials we were told to imagine might be filled with anthrax spores. Haley got fully into the same mode when she said about the missile that hit close to the Riyadh airport, "Just imagine if this missile had been launched at Dulles Airport or JFK, or the airports in Paris, London, or Berlin. That's what we're talking about here. That's what Iran is actively supporting."

No, Iran isn't supporting that at all. There is zero evidence of any Iranian move toward obtaining a weapon with intercontinental reach. There is no evidence that Iranian military development and procurement are proceeding with anything in mind other than responding to what Iran sees as threats and rivals within its own region.

The heads of the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guard Corps have talked publicly about 2,000 kilometers being a sufficient range for Iranian weapons to meet that need. Such a range is not just talk and is consistent with the larger strategic logic of Iran's defense posture.

It is a harmful waste of the time and attention not only of the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, but also of all the intelligence officers who were involved in putting together that display at DIA, to be hyping an imaginary intercontinental threat when the United States faces a real one from North Korea.

We still don't know exactly where Trump, Haley, or anyone else in the current administration wants or expects to go with their campaign of stoking maximum tension with, and hostility toward, Iran. But more and more of their campaign sounds a lot like what the Bush administration and neoconservatives were saying

about Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Add to the other similarities a perversion of the relationship between policy and intelligence.

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 National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Missing the Significance of Israel-gate

Amid the U.S. mainstream media's hyping of Russia-gate, there has been much less attention given to what some call "Israel-gate," evidence that Israel was wielding much more behind-the-scenes influence, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Trump's decision to begin moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to the disputed city of Jerusalem – and disclosure that first-son-in-law Jared Kushner failed to disclose his role in a foundation funding Israeli settlements and lobbied against a United Nations' resolution critical of those settlements during the transition – are reminders that the foreign government with truly broad influence over U.S. politics is Israel.

Trump's Jerusalem announcement also threatened to touch off more disorder in the Middle East, which Ali Abunimah, co-founder of the Electronic Intifada, says reflected the Trump administration's determination to demand a full capitulation by the Palestinians. I spoke with Abunimah on Dec. 5.

Dennis Bernstein: We turn our attention back to occupied Palestine. We have now seen the kind of policy we are going to get from the Trump administration.

Jared Kushner has described bringing peace to the region as his dream. We are going to talk about that in the context of his investment in settlements there. I suppose the central issue in Palestine this week is whether the embassy is going to be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and what will the timing be, as in, will it happen some time soon?

Ali Abunimah: Actually, it will not be moved any time soon. Trump will announce tomorrow [Dec. 6] that the US is recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital but he will also sign a waiver delaying the move for another six months and the whole process will likely take years.

Dennis Bernstein: How bad is the situation now? We know that settlements are being built apace, that the repression continues in the Gaza Strip, where life is barely livable.

Ali Abunimah: It is interesting that no one is actually talking about what is happening on the ground in Jerusalem, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians there are facing systematic ethnic cleansing by Israel. This includes home demolitions, revocation of residency rights, land confiscations.

In the words of B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, since the occupation of East Jerusalem began in 1967, Israel has treated Palestinians in the city as "unwanted immigrants" and worked systematically to drive them out of the area. Whatever Trump announces tomorrow will not change the situation. The so-called international community is doing nothing about it and is letting Israel get away with it.

Dennis Bernstein: Jared Kushner is a broker for illegal settlements.

Ali Abunimah: He is a donor to illegal settlements, a philanthropist for illegal settlements. How many headlines have been devoted to Kushner failing to disclose important information in his government ethics filings? The latest is that he failed to disclose the fact that he was a director of his family's foundation, which has donated to building settlements in the occupied West Bank, particularly the settlement of Beit El, the same settlement that receives philanthropic donations from David Friedman, Trump's ambassador in Tel Aviv.

Kushner, who is supposedly charged with coming up with a peace plan, is actually busy funding settlements. Kushner's family are close friends of Benjamin Netanyahu. It is just farcical to pretend that anyone like Jared Kushner could ever be an honest broker.

Dennis Bernstein: Is all of this legal?

Ali Abunimah: That's questionable. Actually, in the past year there were lawsuits filed challenging this massive multi-billion dollar flow of tax-deductible, so-called charitable funds for illegal purposes, including the construction of settlements and massive donations to groups like Friends of the IDF.

Another issue is this whole business of what Jared Kushner was doing during the transition, when he was trying to undermine the policy of the sitting Obama administration and stop the UN Security Council resolution passed last December condemning Israeli settlements. This all came out in the context of the Mueller investigation and Michael Flynn's guilty plea, which revealed not so much a collusion with Russia as a very close collusion between the Trump transition and

Israel.

Dennis Bernstein: You would think then that MSNBC, which makes a living on pumping up Russiagate, would want to jump into this case of collusion.

Ali Abunimah: The Michael Flynn revelation did not show collusion with Russia and certainly did not show any interference in the US election. What Flynn pled guilty to was lying about two meetings. Flynn is a serial liar, he lied about his work for the Turkish government.

The facts that were filed in the documents with his plea show that a "very senior member" of the Trump transition team, who has since been identified as Jared Kushner, had ordered Flynn to contact every member of the UN Security Council to try to defeat this resolution criticizing Israel. It was also reported in The New York Times that Kushner had acted at the urging of Netanyahu.

None of this has anything to do with Russian interference in the elections. What it does show is clear collusion at the highest level with a foreign government [Israel] to undermine and sabotage the policy of the sitting administration.

Dennis Bernstein: It doesn't appear that Arab outrage is going to have much influence over what happens with this plan to move the capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Ali Abunimah: On the contrary, I think that it has actually been facilitated by the fact that Saudi Arabia, which markets itself as the guardian of Islam, has been engaging in this major rapprochement with Israel, pressuring the Palestinians to accept what amounts to surrender, in order to get them out of the way so that Saudi Arabia and Israel can embrace each other and go to war together against Iran.

The New York Times reported details of the so-called Trump peace plan that Jared Kushner has been putting together, which basically creates a Palestinian state in name only. The Palestinians would have very limited autonomy in very small non-contiguous areas of the West Bank. They would have no control, no sovereignty, no capital in East Jerusalem, no right of return for refugees, and so on. But they would be free to call this a Palestinian state if they want to.

All of this sounds familiar to people who have followed this issue because this is a rehashing of the kind of schemes that have been put forward since the 1990's. What is different this time is that Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority leader, was called to Riyadh last month and told by Mohammad bin Salman that he was going to accept this or else. The thinking behind it is that

the Palestinian issue is a thorn in the side of the Saudi/Israeli alliance that wants to escalate the catastrophic confrontation with Iran.

Dennis Bernstein: How does the crisis with the prime minister in Lebanon play into all of this?

Ali Abunimah: The Saudis have been behind so many of the regional disasters, including escalating the situation in Syria by funding a proxy war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. For two years they have been bombing the poorest Arab country, Yemen, with millions suffering famine and tens of thousands killed and injured. Saudi Arabia has been unable to defeat the people resisting them in Yemen. They were trying to destabilize Lebanon and that failed because [Prime Minister] Hariri went home and rescinded his forced resignation under pressure from the Saudis.

Dennis Bernstein: I guess maybe the one silver lining in all of this is the boycott/divestment movement. There is not much else going on in terms of global resistance to the brutality in occupied Palestine.

Ali Abunimah: I suppose it is possible to look at all of this and just feel immobilized and hopeless. But I think it is important to feel hope as well. Even in Jerusalem, Palestinians have been standing up to Israel and winning victories, as they did this summer when they forced Israel to back down from its efforts to impose stricter control on entrance to the al-Aqsa mosque compound. That was a real victory for people power in Jerusalem against one of the strongest armies in the world.

Despite a twenty-fold increase in lobbying, Israel has not been able to stop the “impressive growth” of the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly the boycott/divestment/sanctions movement. So it’s not time to be hopeless, it’s time to get on with the work, because there is lots to do and people power is still winning victories.

Dennis Bernstein: I guess you could say that proof of those victories is the amount of repression and clamp-down of Palestinian students and their supporters all over the country.

Ali Abunimah: And it is across the board now, including the effort of the big Silicon Valley companies who are helping the establishment to censor and limit the reach of independent media like us. They know that people are listening and we are powerful, even though we may sometimes feel small in the face of the forces that are trying to reshape the world.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the

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