

The U.S. is Meddling in Venezuelan Election

As Venezuelans go to the polls Sunday, the U.S. is working to disrupt the re-election of Nicolas Maduro and rollback leftwing governments in the region, reports Roger D. Harris.

By **Roger D. Harris** *Special to Consortium News*



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is the frontrunner in the presidential elections that will take place on Sunday. If past pronouncements and practice by the United States are any indication, every effort will be made to oust an avowed socialist from the the U.S. “backyard.”

This week, the leftist president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, tweeted: “Before the elections they (U.S. and allies) will carry out violent actions supported by the media and after the elections they will try a military invasion with Armed Forces from neighboring countries.”

U.S. antipathy towards the Venezuelan government started with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, followed by a brief and unsuccessful U.S.-backed coup in 2002. Chávez made the magnanimous, but politically imprudent, gesture of pardoning the *golpistas*, who are still trying to achieve by extra-parliamentary means what they have been unable to realize democratically. After Chávez died in 2013, the Venezuelans elected Maduro to carry on what has become known as the Bolivarian Revolution.

The Phantom Menace

In 2015 then U.S. President Barack Obama declared “a national emergency” because of a supposed Venezuelan threat to the U.S. The U.S. has military bases to the west of Venezuela in Colombia and to the east in the Dutch colonial islands. The Fourth Fleet patrols Venezuela’s Caribbean coast. Yet somehow in the twisted logic of imperialism, the phantom of Venezuela posed a menacing, “extraordinary threat” to the U.S.

Each year Obama renewed and deepened sanctions against Venezuela under the National Emergencies Act. Taking no chances that his successor might not be sufficiently hostile to Venezuela, Obama prematurely renewed the sanctions his last year in office even though the sanctions would not have expired until two months into Trump’s tenure.

The fear was that presumptive U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson might try to

normalize U.S. -Venezuelan relations to negotiate an oil deal between Venezuela and his former employer Exxon. As it turns out, the Democrats need not have feared Trump going soft on regime change.

Last August, Donald Trump publicly raised the "military option" to overthrow Venezuela's democratically-elected government. Then David Smilde of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) counseled for regime change, not by military means, but by "deepening the current sanctions" to "save Venezuela." The somewhat liberal, inside-the-beltway NGO argued against a direct military invasion because the Venezuelan military would resist, not because such an act is the gravest violation of international law.

Meanwhile the sanctions have taken a punishing toll on the Venezuelan people, even causing death. Sanctions are designed, in Richard Nixon's blood-curdling words, to "make the economy scream" so that the people will abandon their democratically elected government for one vetted by the U.S.

In January, Trump's first State of the Union address called for regime change of leftist governments in Latin America, boasting, "My government has imposed harsh sanctions on the communist and socialist dictatorships of Cuba and Venezuela." Hearing these stirring words, both Democrats and Republicans burst out in thunderous applause.

"Dictatorships," as the term is wielded by the U.S. government and mainstream media, should be understood as countries that try to govern in the interests of their own peoples rather than privileging the dictates of the U.S. State Department and the prerogatives of international capital.

Attack of the Clones

In addition to summoning Venezuela's sycophantic domestic opposition, who support sanctions against their own people, the U.S. has gone on the offensive using the regional Lima Group to destabilize Venezuela. The group was established last August in Lima, the capital of Peru, as a block to oppose Venezuela.

The eighth Summit of the Americas was held in Lima in April under the lofty slogan of "democratic governance against corruption." Unfortunately for the imperialists, the president of the host country was unable to greet the other U.S. clones. A few days earlier he had been forced to resign because of corruption. Venezuelan President Maduro was barred from attending.

Along with Peru and the U.S. ' ever faithful junior partner Canada, other members of the Lima Group are:

- Mexico, a prime participant of the U.S. -sponsored War on Drugs, is plagued with drug cartel violence. The frontrunner for the July presidential election is left-of-center Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who is widely believed to have won the last two elections only to have them stolen from him.
- Panama's government is a direct descendent of the one installed on a U.S. warship when the U.S. invaded Panama in 1989. Recall the triggering incident that unleashed U.S. bombs and 26,000 troops into Panama against a defense force of 3,000: a GI in civilian clothes was fatally shot running a military checkpoint and another GI and his wife were assaulted. What similarly grave affront to the global hegemon might precipitate a comparable military response for Venezuela? Panama imposed sanctions against Venezuela in a spat in April, accusing Venezuela of money laundering. Panama is a regional money laundering center for the illicit drug trade (some alleged through a Trump-owned hotel).
- Argentina elected Mauricio Macri president in 2015. He immediately sold the country out to the vulture funds and the IMF while imposing severe austerity measures on working people. The economy has tanked, reversing the gains of the previous left-leaning presidencies of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández. Military and diplomatic deference to the U.S. has become the order of the day. Macri has negotiated installation of two U.S. military bases in Argentina, first with Obama and now with Trump.
- Brazil deposed its left-leaning, democratically elected President Dilma Rousseff in a 2016 parliamentary coup. Her successor, the unelected Michel Temer, has imposed austerity measures and cooperated with the U.S. in joint military exercises along the Brazilian border with Venezuela. Temer suffers from single digit popularity ratings and is barred from running for public office due to a corruption conviction. Former left-leaning president "Lula" da Silva is the frontrunner in October's presidential election but was imprisoned in April by Temer's government.
- Chile was the victim of the U.S. -backed coup, which overthrew the elected left-leaning government of Salvador Allende in 1973. A reign of terror followed with the extreme rightwing government of Gen. Augusto Pinochet killing thousands. An economic and diplomatic destabilization campaign coordinated by Washington set the stage for the coup. The Chilean regime-change scenario could be the model for Venezuela. The rightwing opposition in Venezuela torched a maternity hospital with mothers and babies inside

and even poured gasoline on suspected Chávez supporters, burning them alive.

- Colombia is the U.S. ' closest ally in the region, the recipient of the most U.S. military aid, and the source of the greatest amount of illicit drugs afflicting the U.S. . The Colombian government has flaunted its recent peace accords with the FARC and continues to be a world leader with 7 million internally displaced persons and political assassinations of trade union leaders, human rights workers, and journalists. In cooperation with the U.S. , Colombia has been provocatively massing troops along its border with Venezuela.
- Costa Rica is a neoliberal state that has been a staunch silent partner of U.S. imperialism ever since it served as a base for the Contra war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.
- Guatemala is a major source of undocumented immigrants fleeing violence into the relative safety of the U.S. . Femicide is rampant as is criminal impunity, all legacies of the U.S. -backed dirty war of genocide from the 1960s through the '80s, which claimed some 200,000 Mayan lives.
- Honduras' left-leaning President Zelaya was deposed in a U.S. -backed coup in 2009. In the aftermath of rightwing repression and domestic violence, Honduras earned the title of murder capital of the world. The current rightwing president was reelected last November in an election so blatantly fraudulent that even the Organization of American States (OAS) failed to endorse the results.
- Paraguay is the site of the first of the rightwing parliamentary coups in the region when left-leaning President Fernando Lugo was deposed in 2012.

Such is the nature of the rightwing states allied against Venezuela in contemporary Latin America. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this right tide is the willingness of Brazil and Argentina to allow U.S. military installations in their border areas as well as conducting joint U.S. -led military exercises with contingents from Panama, Colombia and other countries.

Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua are Venezuela's few remaining regional allies, all of which have been subject to U.S. -backed regime-change schemes. Most recently, the Nicaraguan government undertook modest measures to increase workers' and employers' contributions but lower benefits. It led to violent demonstrations.

Some sources hostile to the Ortega government labelled the protests as “made in the U.S. A.” In the face of such protests, the government rescinded the changes on April 23.

The Empire Strikes Back

In early April, the U.S. Southern Command conducted a series of military exercises, dubbed “Fused Response,” just 10 miles off the Venezuelan coast, simulating an invasion.

Later that month, Juan Cruz, Special Assistant to President Trump and Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, was asked whether the U.S. government supports a military coup in Venezuela. Speaking for the White House and dripping with imperial arrogance, he responded affirmatively:

“If you look at the history of Venezuela, there’s never been a seminal movement in Venezuela’s history, politics, that did not involve the military. And so it would be naïve for us to think that a solution in Venezuela wouldn’t in some fashion include a very strong nod – at a minimum – strong nod from the military, a whisper in the ear, a coaxing or a nudging, or something a lot stronger than that.”

Across the Atlantic on May 3, the European Parliament demanded Venezuela suspend presidential elections. Four days later, U.S. Vice President Pence called on the OAS to expel Venezuela. Adding injury to insult, the U.S. announced yet another round of sanctions. Then the next day, U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley joined the chorus calling on President Maduro to cancel the presidential election and resign.

Far more blatant and frightening is the *Plan to Overthrow the Venezuelan Dictatorship – Masterstroke*, dated February 23, 2018. *Masterstroke* was leaked on the website Voltaire.net.org and picked up by Stella Calloni in the reliable and respected Resumen Latinoamericano. Although *Masterstroke* is unverified, the contents as reported by Calloni are entirely consistent with U.S. policy and pronouncements:

“The document signed by the head of the U.S. Southern Command demands making the Maduro government unsustainable by forcing him to give up, negotiate or escape. This Plan to end in very short terms the so-called ‘dictatorship’ of Venezuela calls for, ‘Increase internal instability to critical levels, intensifying the decapitalization of the country, the escape of foreign capital and the deterioration of the national currency, through the application of new inflationary measures that increase this deterioration.’”

That is, blame the Venezuelan government for the conditions imposed upon it by

its enemies.

Masterstroke calls for, "Continuing to harden the condition within the (Venezuelan) Armed Forces to carry out a coup d'état, before the end of 2018, if this crisis does not cause the dictatorship to collapse or if the dictator (Maduro) does not decide to step aside."

Failing an internal coup, *Masterstroke* plans an international military invasion: "Uniting Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Panama to contribute a good number of troops, make use of their geographic proximity..."

A New Hope

With the urging of the Pope and under the auspices of the government of the Dominican Republic, the Maduro government and elements of the opposition agreed to sit down to negotiate last January in the hopes of ending the cycle of violence and the deterioration of living conditions in Venezuela.

By early February they had come to a tentative agreement to hold elections. The Maduro government initially opposed a UN election observation team as a violation of national sovereignty, but then accepted it as a concession to the opposition. The opposition in turn would work to end the unilateral sanctions by the U.S. , Canada, and the EU, which are so severely crippling the daily life of ordinary Venezuelans. Two years of adroit diplomacy by the Maduro government with the less extreme elements of the opposition were bearing fruit.

The agreement had been crafted and a meeting was called for the government and the opposition to sign on. The government came to the final meeting, but not the opposition. The opposition as good clones of Washington had gotten a call from their handlers to bail.

In a damned-if-you-do/damned-if-you-don't scenario, the U.S. first accused Venezuela of not scheduling presidential elections. Then elections were scheduled, but too early for the U.S. . Then the date of the elections was moved to April and then extended to May. No matter what, the U.S. would not abide by any elections in Venezuela. *Ipsa facto* elections are considered fraudulent by U.S. if the people might vote for the wrong candidate.

Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), the coalition of Venezuelan opposition groups allied with and partially funded by the U.S., are accordingly boycotting Sunday's election and are putting pressure on Henri Falcón to withdraw his candidacy. Falcón is Maduro's main competition in the election. MUD has already concluded that the election is fraudulent and are doing all they can to discourage voting.

CNBC, reflecting the Washington consensus, expects the U.S. to directly target the Venezuelan oil industry immediately after the election in what they describe as “a huge sucker punch to Maduro’s socialist administration, which is depending almost entirely on crude sales to try and decelerate a deepening economic crisis.”

Ever hopeful and always militant, Maduro launched the new Petro cryptocurrency and revalued the country’s traditional currency, the Bolivar, in March. The Petro is collateralized on Venezuela’s vast mineral resources: the largest petroleum reserves in the world and large reserves of gold and other precious metals. The U.S. immediately accused Venezuela of sinisterly trying to circumvent the sanctions...which is precisely the intent of the Petro and other economic reforms, some of which are promised for after the presidential election.

The Force Awakens

Latin America has been considered the U.S. empire’s proprietary backyard since the proclamation of the Monroe Document in 1823, reaffirmed by John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress in 1961, and asserted by today’s open military posturing by President Trump.

The so-called Pink Tide of left-leaning governments spearheaded by Venezuela in the early part of this century served as a counter-hegemonic force. By any objective estimation that force has been ebbing but can awaken.

Before Chávez, all of Latin America suffered under neoliberal regimes except Cuba. If Maduro is overthrown, a major obstacle to re-establishing this hemispheric wide neoliberalism would be gone.

The future of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution is pivotal to the future of the counter-hegemonic project, which is why it is the empire’s prime target in the Western Hemisphere. If the Venezuelan government falls, all Latin American progressive movements could suffer immensely: AML0’s campaign in Mexico, the resistance in Honduras and Argentina, maybe the complete end of the peace accords in Colombia, a left alternative to Lenin Moreno in Ecuador, the Sandinista social programs in Nicaragua, the struggle for Lula’s presidency in Brazil, and even Morales and the indigenous movements in Bolivia.

As U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger said in 1970: “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves.”

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imperialist human rights organization, the Task Force on the Americas. He will be observing the Venezuela presidential election on a delegation with Venezuela Analysis and the Intrepid News Fund.

Iran Deal Partners Mull How to Confront 'Renegade' U.S.

With the U.S. out of the Iran nuclear deal and with Americans ordering Europeans to stop dealing with Tehran, the remaining signatories are trying to figure out how to confront the U.S., says Enrico Carisch.

By Enrico Carisch



What can the five remaining signatories to the Iran nuclear deal do now that the Trump administration has trampled on Security Council Resolution 2231 and its 13 binding decisions, adopted under Article 41 of the United Nations Charter, which codified the Iran nuclear deal into international law? Sooner or later, the other 14 members of the Security Council, especially Britain, China, France and Russia, must decide how to confront their renegade permanent member, the United States.

Otherwise, the Council may lose its unique authority to prevent and resolve conflicts.

Specifically, the question they may soon have to confront will be how they can protect the resolution and the companies that comply with it when doing business with Iranians, given that Iran is subject once again to new U.S. sanctions.

The first broadside against the companies of U.S. allies that are doing business with Iran came minutes after President Donald Trump announced his withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, on May 8. Richard Grenell, his ambassador to Germany (and spokesman for the U.S. at the UN from 2001-2008), tweeted, "German companies doing business in Iran should wind down operations immediately."

The reaction was immediate, but it was outrage, not compliance, that German diplomatic and business leaders expressed.

"We have no understanding for the American call that German enterprises are expected to immediately drive down their business in Iran," said Dieter Kempf, president of the Association of German Industry, a trade group. "German industry

criticizes the application of extraterritorial sanctions that violate international law.”

French leaders lost no time in discussing countermeasures. Patrick Pouyanné, chief executive of the petroleum producer Total, is seeking European Union protection against likely American penalties for Total holding on to its 50.1 percent investment, worth close to \$4 billion, in Iran’s South Pars natural gas project.

For international companies caught between respecting Resolution 2231 and new U.S. sanctions, the easiest solution would be to obtain exemptions from the U.S. Treasury’s Office for Foreign Asset Control. But the office has signaled that there will be little leeway once it would “begin the process of implementing 90-day and 180-day wind-down periods” for activities that were – until now – permitted under the JCPOA.

Hardliners Will Gain

Reuters has also reported that Steven Mnuchin, the U.S. treasury secretary, is throwing cold water on hopes that waivers or exemptions will be granted.

Regarding the huge 200-passenger aircraft deal that Iran signed with Boeing, the American company; and other deals with Airbus, the European aviation consortium, and ATR, a French-Italian company, Mnuchin said, “The Boeing and Airbus licenses will be revoked.”

The Office for Foreign Asset Control has the ability to not only interfere with Boeing’s sales but also the European manufacturers’ dealings with Iran because “under the original deal, there were waivers for commercial aircraft, parts and services.”

While exemptions may save some foreign companies’ investments in Iran, those of strategic value to the country’s development and military strength will likely become the battlefield between U.S. sanctions and the UN sanctions relief that were mandated in Resolution 2231.

The result of weak protection from U.S. sanctions on Iran will be Iranians’ continued economic suffering. The sanctions-stunted commerce and development of their industries will almost certainly mean that President Hassan Rouhani will lose control of the government to hard-line conservatives.

In a repeat of the 2005 resurgence of Iran’s conservatives, which is already fermenting, the country could turn into everything that Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel, have been deceptively claiming all along: that Iranians are aggressive nuclear proliferators and a threat to

the regional Sunni hierarchy.

France, Germany, Britain and other European powers are united in trying to prevent a newly radicalized Iran from resuming enrichment of fissile material, which could trigger a new Middle East war. In a statement released immediately after Trump's announcement on May 8, Prime Minister Theresa May, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron declared, "We, the E3, will remain parties to the JCPOA."

But Trump threatened in his speech from the White House, "Any nation that helps Iran in its quest for nuclear weapons could also be strongly sanctioned by the United States."

Nevertheless, the three European heads of state pledged, "Our governments remain committed to ensuring the agreement is upheld, and will work with all the remaining parties to the deal to ensure this remains the case including through ensuring the continuing economic benefits to the Iranian people that are linked to the agreement."

The U.S. Military Threat

Regional stability is, however, an issue that the U.S. apparently intends to deal with militarily, according to a presidential memorandum released on May 8 by the White House. Under the heading "Preparing for Regional Contingencies," Trump instructed the secretary of defense and heads of any other relevant agencies to "prepare to meet, swiftly and decisively, all possible modes of Iranian aggression against the United States, our allies, and our partners.

The Department of Defense shall ensure that the United States develops and retains the means to stop Iran from developing or acquiring a nuclear weapon and related delivery systems."



Did this chilling directive mean that the U.S. was preparing preventive strikes against Iran's ballistic missile development facilities? The answer came quicker than most

people would have expected.

Alleging a failed barrage of 20 Iranian missiles striking the Golan Heights, Israel's defense forces (IDF) struck back at dozens of Hezbollah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps positions based in Syria. However, neither the IDF website nor its spokesperson provided evidence for the alleged missiles attack. They also did not provide evidence, if the attacks did occur, that the missiles were fired by Iranian and not Syrian armed forces.

Citing Arab news channels, the Iranian news agency FARS reported only the Syrian army's response. *Al Mayadeen* news channel, a media site based in Beirut, claimed "that 50 rockets were fired at 4 Israeli military complex centers in occupied Golan," whereas the Syrian Al-Alam news channel reported the firing of 68 missiles.

Failing to explain why Iran's forces should suddenly launch a small, unsuccessful attack on Israel, IDF noted merely that "this is the first time that Iranian forces have directly fired at Israeli troops." *The Guardian* said the "analysis of who is to blame for this outbreak of hostilities demands even more than usual skepticism and careful un-packaging."

Stopping Trump

So what can the Europeans do with China and Russia to stop the escalating violence between Israel and Iran and to blunt Trump's undiplomatic – and possible military – assault on Iran and the tenuous state of Middle East peace?

Taking the matter to the Security Council makes little sense, as the 10 elected members have noted.

“Any attempts to discuss a new formula of the JCPOA minus U.S.A would be blocked,” explained several European and Asian representatives of the Council’s elected members, after Trump’s announcement. They assume that the U.S. ambassador, Nikki Hailey, is almost certainly under instructions to prevent further discussions about the Iran deal.

In addition, any proposed resolution asserting the primacy of Resolution 2231 over unilateral policies would, of course, be smacked down with a veto, as is the usual case with attempts to discuss Israeli threats – or provocations – to peace and security.

All of which now leaves the Security Council irrationally outmaneuvered.

It is one reason that Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, signaled his government’s commitment to continue collaborating with the rest of the world after the Trump announcement by offering to “spearhead a diplomatic effort to examine whether remaining JCPOA participants can ensure its full benefits for Iran.”

The signals from the remaining nuclear-deal signatories is that the strongest rebuke of Trump’s destructive move is to keep the deal’s formula, minus the U.S. participation, if they can do it.

This article originally appeared on [PassBlue](#).

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The Coming War Against Iran

We’ve been through this before: the trumped-up threat from Iraq based on false evidence in 2003 is the harrowingly similar model to what is emerging for Iran in 2018, argues John Kiriakou.

By John Kiriakou



I spent nearly 15 years in the CIA. I like to think that I learned something there. I learned how the federal bureaucracy works. I learned that cowboys in government – in the CIA and elsewhere around government – can have incredible power over the creation of policy. I learned that the CIA will push the envelope of legality until somebody in a position of authority pushes back. I learned that the CIA can wage war without any thought whatsoever as to how things will work out in the end. There's never an exit strategy.

I learned all of that firsthand in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. In the spring of 2002, I was in Pakistan working against al-Qaeda. I returned to CIA headquarters in May of that year and was told that several months earlier a decision had been made at the White House to invade Iraq. I was dumbfounded, and when told of the war plans could only muster, "But we haven't caught bin Laden yet." "The decision has already been made," my supervisor told me. He continued, "Next year, in February, we're going to invade Iraq, overthrow Saddam Hussein, and open the world's largest air force base in southern Iraq." He went on, "We're going to go to the United Nations and pretend that we want a Security Council Resolution. But the truth is that the decision has already been made."

Soon after, Secretary of State Colin Powell began traveling around Europe and the Middle East to cultivate support for the invasion. Sure enough, he also went to the United Nations and argued that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, necessitating an invasion and overthrow because that country posed an imminent threat to the United States.

But the whole case was built on a lie. A decision was made and then the "facts" were created around the decision to support it. I think the same thing is happening now.

Iraq Redux

First, Donald Trump said repeatedly during the 2016 campaign that he would pull out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (which he did on Tuesday), also known as the Iran sanctions deal. The JCPOA allows for international inspectors to examine all of Iran's nuclear sites to ensure that the country is not enriching uranium and is not building a weapons program. In exchange, Western countries have lifted sanctions on Iran, allowing them to buy spare parts, medicines, and other things that they had been unable to acquire. Despite the protestations of conservatives in Congress and elsewhere, the JCPOA works. Indeed, the inspection regime is exactly the same one that the United Nations imposed on Iraq in the last two decades.

Trump has kept up his anti-Iran rhetoric since becoming president. More importantly, he has appointed Iran hawks to the two most important positions in foreign policy: former CIA Director Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton as national security advisor. The two have made clear that their preferred policy toward Iran is “regime change,” a policy that is actually prohibited by international law.

Perhaps the most troubling development, however, is the apparent de facto alliance against Iran by Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent “presentation” on what he called a clandestine Iranian nuclear weapons program was embarrassingly similar to Powell’s heavily scripted speech before the UN Security Council 15 years earlier telling the world that Iraq had a program. That, too, was a lie.

Another Hyped Threat

Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, the godfather of the Saudi war in Yemen, which in turn is a proxy war against Iran, recently made a grand tour of the United States and France talking about “the Iranian threat” at every turn. The rhetoric coming out of the UAE and Bahrain is at least as hostile as what has been spewed by the Saudis.

Meanwhile, there’s silence on Capitol Hill. Just like there was in 2002.

I can tell you from firsthand experience, that I’ve seen this before. Our government is laying the groundwork for yet another war. Be on the lookout for several things. First, Trump is going to begin shouting about the “threat” from Iran. It will become a daily mantra. He’ll argue that Iran is actively hostile and poses an immediate danger to the United States. Next Pompeo will head back to the Middle East and Europe to garner support for military action. Then US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley will scream in front of the UN Security Council that the US has no choice but to protect itself and its allies from Iran. The final shoe to drop – a clear indication of war – will be if naval carrier battle groups are deployed to the eastern Mediterranean, the Arabian Sea, or the Persian Gulf. Sure, there’s always one in the region anyway. But more than one is a provocation.

We have to be diligent in opposing this run into another war of choice. We can’t be tricked or taken by surprise. Not again.

This piece originally appeared at RSN.

John Kiriakou is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. John became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act – a

law designed to punish spies. He served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempts to oppose the Bush administration's torture program.

Scariest 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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War Fever

There is a fever that seizes this land from time to time and it is the fever of war, a condition that this time seems immune to all known cures, starting with reason, as Daniel Lazare explores.

By Daniel Lazare *Special to Consortium News*



What happens when an unthinkable war meets an unbeatable case of war fever? Thanks to Russia-gate, unsubstantiated reports about the use of poison gas in Syria, and a slew of similar factoids and pseudo-scandals, the world may soon find out.

In saner times, including during the Cold War at even its most heated, political leaders knew not to push a conflict with a rival nuclear power too far. After all, what was the point of getting into a fight in which everyone would lose?

Cooler heads thus prevailed in Washington while more excitable sorts were shipped off to where they could do no harm. This is what kept the peace during the U-2 affair, the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis and what promised

to continue doing so even after the advent of American “unipolarity” in 1989-92.

But that was then. Today, the question is no longer how to avoid a fight that can only lead to catastrophe, but how to avoid a showdown with a country that “in the past four years has annexed Crimea, intervened in eastern Ukraine, sought to influence the American election in 2016, allegedly poisoned a former Russian spy living in Britain and propped up the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria,” to quote the bill of indictment in a recent front-page [article](#) in *The New York Times*.

Given that the list of alleged atrocities expands with virtually each passing week, the answer, increasingly, is: no way, no how. Since Russia is bent on spreading “conflict and discord” throughout the west – if only in the eyes of the U.S., that is – confrontation grows more and more likely.

A Very American Coup

This is despite the fact that the offenses cited by the *Times*

are each more complex or dubious than the “newspaper of record” is willing to concede. The annexation of the Crimea, for instance, was a response to a US-financed, neo-Nazi-spearheaded coup in Kiev in February 2014 that caused the rickety Ukrainian state to collapse and sent Russophones in the east fleeing for protection into the arms of Moscow. After investing more than \$5 billion to steer the Ukraine in such a disastrous direction according to then-Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, the US blamed Russia for the consequences. (See quote beginning at [7:42](#).) As for charges of interference in the 2016 election, the *Times* itself noted back in January 2017 that the formal CIA-FBI-NSA “assessment” blaming the Kremlin was notably bereft of factual back-up. As the paper [put it](#):

“[T]he declassified report contained no information about how the agencies had collected their data or had come to their conclusions. So it is bound to be attacked by skeptics and by partisans of Mr. Trump, who see the review as a political effort to impugn the legitimacy of his election.”

Quite right. But now evidence-free assertions are accepted as fact while anyone who says otherwise is ignored or shouted down. Questions linger with regard to the March 4 poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, most notably why a supposedly ultra-powerful nerve agent would not take effect for more than seven hours. (Someone supposedly smeared the nerve agent on [the front door of Sergei's home](#) in Salisbury, England, which he and his daughter left around nine in the morning. Yet it was not until 4:15 p.m. that they were found incapacitated on a park bench after visiting a pub and eating at a local

restaurant.)

As for “the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad,” such talk would be silly if the consequences weren’t so dire. After all, it wasn’t Assad who flooded Syria with tens of thousands of jihadis bent on massacring Christian, Druse, Alawites, and secularists. To the contrary, it was the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arab Gulf states. As a now declassified Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#) noted back in August 2012:

- “The Salafist[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [i.e. Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency”;
- “The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the [rebel] opposition”;
- “If the situation unravels further, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria”;
- “...[T]his is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition [i.e. the US, Turkey, and the gulf states] want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion...”

A Sectarian War

In other words, the US and its Sunni Arab allies launched a sectarian war against the Alawite-backed Syrian regime with the full knowledge that an Al Qaeda state in eastern Syria might well be the result. Yet now they blame Assad for defending himself against the Salafist onslaught and Russia for helping him. It is a case of launching a neo-medieval sectarian war and then crying foul when the other side dares to fight back.

One would think that cooler heads might inject a note of sanity before things get completely out of hand. But the opposite seems to be the case. The more temperatures rise, the more congressmen, journalists, think-tank experts, and other hangers-on conclude that it is advantageous to jump on the bandwagon and drive passions up even more. Pro-war frenzy leads to more of the same. The more reason is needed, the scarcer it becomes.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the only halfway sane person left in Washington is Donald Trump, who, according to [a strange report](#) in Sunday’s *Washington Post*, is fighting a desperate rear-guard action against neocons bent on ratcheting up tensions to ever higher levels.

Reporters Greg Jaffe, John Hudson, and Philip Rucker described a bizarre scene at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Florida resort last month in which aides were only able to persuade the president to expel sixty Russian diplomats in retaliation for the

Skripal poisoning by promising him that allies would toss out an equal number in Europe. When France and Germany only expelled four Russians each, Trump felt double-crossed. “I don’t care about the total,” he reportedly screamed when the aides tried to explain that the number expelled by all European nations would eventually approach the U.S. figure. “There were curse words,” one official told the *Post*, “a lot of curse words.”

Similarly, when Congress approved a new round of anti-Russian sanctions in July, the article says it took aides four days to persuade Trump to sign the bill even though it had cleared with a veto-proof majority that made it a virtual *fait accompli*. The *Post* said the same thing occurred when aides tried to convince him to sell antitank missiles to the Ukraine for use against pro-Russian separatists. “Why is this our problem?” he reportedly asked. “Why not let the Europeans deal with Ukraine?” When CIA Director Mike Pompeo, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis added their voices to the chorus, all the president could do was whine, “I just want peace.”

Everyone Agreed—Except Trump

Of course, when Donald Trump is the sole remaining voice of reason, then we’re really in trouble. The infighting escalated even further on Monday after Haley vowed to slap still more sanctions on Russia for the crime of backing Assad. “They have done nothing but brutalize their people and destroy their land, all in the name of power,” she [said](#) of the Baathists on CBS News’s “Face the Nation.” So Russia would have to pay the price.

Everyone agreed, Republicans, Democrats, and the corporate media – everyone, that is, except Trump. Defying his neocon captors, he undercut Haley by declaring that sanctions would not be forthcoming after all. White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders was left to gamely [assert](#) that “the president has been clear that he’s going to be tough on Russia, but at the same time he’d still like to have a good relationship with them.”

Times columnist Michelle Goldberg was so flabbergasted by Trump’s about-face that she [wondered](#) whether reports that Putin was using a secret “pee tape” to force him into line might not be true after all.

But of course – who else would want an end to hostilities with Russia other than a crazy man or someone under duress? War with a nuclear power is something that no sane person really wants to avoid, right?

U.S. foreign policy is caught in a powerful contradiction. A military showdown with a fellow nuclear power is unthinkable. Yet pausing for a moment to consider where all this madness is leading is out of the question. Two forces

are colliding, war on one hand and a general inability to think things through in a clear-headed way on the other.

It's a case of a herd of independent minds stampeding over a cliff – not because someone is forcing them to, but because they don't know how to stop.

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as Jacobin and The American Conservative.

Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?

From the Archive: As the U.S. blames Damascus and Moscow for recent chlorine gas attacks in Syria, we re-publish a report by Robert Parry providing useful context regarding a chemical attack last April.

By Robert Parry (first published Nov. 9, 2017)

A new United Nations-sponsored report on the April 4 sarin incident in an Al Qaeda-controlled town in Syria blames Bashar al-Assad's government for the atrocity, but the report contains evidence deep inside its "Annex II" that would prove Assad's innocence.

If you read that far, you would find that more than 100 victims of sarin exposure were taken to several area hospitals *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have struck the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Still, the Joint Investigative Mechanism [JIM], a joint project of the U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], brushed aside this startling evidence and delivered the Assad guilty verdict that the United States and its allies wanted.

The JIM consigned the evidence of a staged atrocity, in which Al Qaeda operatives would have used sarin to kill innocent civilians and pin the blame on Assad, to a spot 14 pages into the report's Annex II. The sensitivity of this evidence of a staged "attack" is heightened by the fact that President Trump rushed to judgment and ordered a "retaliatory" strike with 59 Tomahawk missiles

on a Syrian airbase on the night of April 6-7. That U.S. attack reportedly killed several soldiers at the base and nine civilians, including four children, in nearby neighborhoods.

So, if it becomes clear that Al Qaeda tricked President Trump not only would he be responsible for violating international law and killing innocent people, but he and virtually the entire Western political establishment along with the major news media would look like Al Qaeda's "useful idiots."

Currently, the West and its mainstream media are lambasting the Russians for not accepting the JIM's "assessment," which blames Assad for the sarin attack. Russia is also taking flak for questioning continuation of the JIM's mandate. There has been virtually no mainstream skepticism about the JIM's report and almost no mention in the mainstream of the hospital-timing discrepancy.

Timing Troubles

To establish when the supposed sarin attack occurred on April 4, the JIM report relied on witnesses in the Al Qaeda-controlled town and a curious video showing three plumes of smoke but no airplanes. Based on the video's metadata, the JIM said the scene was recorded between 0642 and 0652 hours. The JIM thus puts the timing of the sarin release at between 0630 and 0700 hours.

But the first admissions of victims to area hospitals began as early as 0600 hours, the JIM found, meaning that these victims could not have been poisoned by the alleged aerial bombing (even if the airstrike really did occur).

According to the report's Annex II, "The admission times of the records range between 0600 and 1600 hours." And these early cases – arriving *before* the alleged airstrike – were not isolated ones.

"Analysis of the ... medical records revealed that in 57 cases, patients were admitted in five hospitals before the incident in Khan Shaykhun," Annex II said.

Plus, this timing discrepancy was not limited to a few hospitals in and around Khan Sheikhoun, but was recorded as well at hospitals that were scattered across the area and included one hospital that would have taken an hour or so to reach.

Annex II stated: "In 10 such cases, patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 125 km away from Khan Shaykhun at 0700 hours while another 42 patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 30 km away at 0700 hours."

In other words, more than 100 patients would appear to have been exposed to sarin *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have dropped the alleged bomb and the victims could be evacuated, a finding that alone would have destroyed the

JIM's case against the Syrian government.

But the JIM seemed more interested in burying this evidence of Al Qaeda staging the incident – and killing some expendable civilians – than in following up this timing problem.

“The [JIM] did not investigate these discrepancies and cannot determine whether they are linked to any possible staging scenario, or to poor record-keeping in chaotic conditions,” the report said. But the proffered excuse about poor record-keeping would have to apply to multiple hospitals over a wide area all falsely recording the arrival time of more than 100 patients.

The video of the plumes of smoke also has come under skepticism from Theodore Postol, a weapons expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who noted that none of the three plumes matched up with damage to buildings (as viewed from satellite images) that would have resulted from aerial bombs of that power.

Postol's finding suggests that the smoke could have been another part of a staging event rather than debris kicked up by aerial bombs.

The JIM also could find no conclusive evidence that a Syrian warplane was over Khan Sheikhoun at the time of the video although the report claims that a plane could have come within about 5 kilometers of the town.

A History of Deception

Perhaps even more significantly, the JIM report ignored the context of the April 4 case and the past history of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front staging chemical weapons attacks with the goal of foisting blame on the Syrian government and tricking the U.S. military into an intervention on the side of Nusra and its Islamic-militant allies.

On April 4, there was a strong motive for Al Qaeda and its regional allies to mount a staged event. Just days earlier, President Trump's administration had shocked the Syrian rebels and their backers by declaring “regime change” was no longer the U.S. goal in Syria.

So, Al Qaeda and its regional enablers were frantic to reverse Trump's decision, which was accomplished by his emotional reaction to videos on cable news showing children and other civilians suffering and dying in Khan Sheikhoun.

On the night of April 6-7, before any thorough investigation could be conducted, Trump ordered 59 Tomahawk missiles fired at the Syrian air base that supposedly had launched the sarin attack.

At the time, I was told by an intelligence source that at least some CIA

analysts believed that the sarin incident indeed had been staged with sarin possibly flown in by drone from a Saudi-Israeli special operations base in Jordan.

This source said the on-the-ground staging for the incident had been hasty because of the surprise announcement that the Trump administration was no longer seeking regime change in Damascus. The haste led to some sloppiness in tying down all the necessary details to pin the atrocity on Assad, the source said.

But the few slip-ups, such as the apparent failure to coordinate the timing of the hospital admissions to *after* the purported airstrike, didn't deter the JIM investigators from backing the West's desire to blame Assad and also create another attack line against the Russians.

Similarly, other U.N.-connected investigators downplayed earlier evidence that Al Qaeda's Nusra was staging chemical weapons incidents after President Obama laid down his "red line" on chemical weapons. The militants apparently hoped that the U.S. military would take out the Syrian military and pave the way for an Al Qaeda victory.

For instance, U.N. investigators learned from a number of townspeople of Al-Tamanah about how the rebels and allied "activists" staged a chlorine gas attack on the night of April 29-30, 2014, and then sold the false story to a credulous Western media and, initially, to a U.N. investigative team.

"Seven witnesses stated that frequent alerts [about an imminent chlorine weapons attack by the government] had been issued, but in fact no incidents with chemicals took place," the U.N. report said. "While people sought safety after the warnings, their homes were looted and rumours spread that the events were being staged. ... [T]hey [these witnesses] had come forward to contest the widespread false media reports."

Dubious Evidence

Other people, who did allege that there had been a government chemical attack on Al-Tamanah, provided suspect evidence, including data from questionable sources, according to the report.

The report said, "Three witnesses, who did not give any description of the incident on 29-30 April 2014, provided material of unknown source. One witness had second-hand knowledge of two of the five incidents in Al-Tamanah, but did not remember the exact dates. Later that witness provided a USB-stick with information of unknown origin, which was saved in separate folders according to the dates of all the five incidents mentioned by the FFM [the U.N.'s Fact-Finding Mission]."

“Another witness provided the dates of all five incidents reading it from a piece of paper, but did not provide any testimony on the incident on 29-30 April 2014. The latter also provided a video titled ‘site where second barrel containing toxic chlorine gas was dropped tamanaa 30 April 14’”

Some other witnesses alleging a Syrian government attack offered curious claims about detecting the chlorine-infused “barrel bombs” based on how the device sounded in its descent.

The U.N. report said, “The eyewitness, who stated to have been on the roof, said to have heard a helicopter and the ‘very loud’ sound of a falling barrel. Some interviewees had referred to a distinct whistling sound of barrels that contain chlorine as they fall. The witness statement could not be corroborated with any further information.”

However, the claim itself is absurd since it is inconceivable that anyone could detect a chlorine canister inside a “barrel bomb” by “a distinct whistling sound.”

The larger point, however, is that the jihadist rebels in Al-Tamanah and their propaganda teams, including relief workers and activists, appear to have organized a coordinated effort at deception complete with a fake video supplied to U.N. investigators and Western media outlets.

For instance, the Telegraph in London reported that “Videos allegedly taken in Al-Tamanah ... purport to show the impact sites of two chemical bombs. Activists said that one person had been killed and another 70 injured.”

The Telegraph quoted supposed weapons expert Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat and a senior fellow at the fiercely anti-Russian Atlantic Council, as endorsing the Al-Tamanah claims.

“Witnesses have consistently reported the use of helicopters to drop the chemical barrel bombs used,” said Higgins. “As it stands, around a dozen chemical barrel bomb attacks have been alleged in that region in the last three weeks.”

The Al-Tamanah debunking in the U.N. report received no mainstream media attention when the U.N. findings were issued in September 2016 because the U.N. report relied on rebel information to blame two other alleged chlorine attacks on the government and that got all the coverage. But the case should have raised red flags given the extent of the apparent deception.

If the seven townspeople were telling the truth, that would mean that the rebels and their allies issued fake attack warnings, produced propaganda videos to fool

the West, and prepped “witnesses” with “evidence” to deceive investigators. Yet, no alarms went off about other rebel claims.

The Ghouta Incident

A more famous attack – with sarin gas on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, killing hundreds – was also eagerly blamed on the Assad regime, as The New York Times, Human Rights Watch, Higgins’s Bellingcat and many other Western outlets jumped to that conclusion despite the unlikely circumstances. Assad had just welcomed U.N. investigators to Damascus to examine chemical attacks that he was blaming on the rebels.

Assad also was facing the “red line” threat from President Obama warning him of possible U.S. military intervention if the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons. Why Assad and his military would choose such a moment to launch a deadly sarin attack outside Damascus, killing mostly civilians, made little sense.

But this became another rush to judgment in the West that brought the Obama administration to the verge of launching a devastating air attack on the Syrian military that might have helped Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and/or the Islamic State win the war.

Eventually, however, the case blaming Assad for the 2013 sarin attack collapsed.

An analysis by genuine weapons experts – such as Theodore Postol, an MIT professor of science, technology and national security policy, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories – found that the missile that delivered the sarin had a very short range placing its likely firing position in rebel territory.

Later, reporting by journalist Seymour Hersh implicated Turkish intelligence working with jihadist rebels as the likely source of the sarin.

We also learned in 2016 that a message from the U.S. intelligence community had warned Obama how weak the evidence against Assad was. There was no “slam-dunk” proof, said Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. And Obama cited his rejection of the Washington militaristic “playbook” to bomb Syria as one of his proudest moments as President.

With this background, there should have been extreme skepticism when jihadists and their allies made new claims about the Syrian government engaging in chemical weapons attacks. But there wasn’t.

The broader context for these biased investigations is that U.N. and OPCW

investigators have been under intense pressure to confirm accusations against Syria and other targeted states.

Right now, the West is blaming Russia for the collapsing consensus behind U.N. investigations, but the problem really comes from Washington's longtime strategy of coercing U.N. organizations into becoming propaganda arms for U.S. geopolitical strategies.

The U.N.'s relative independence in its investigative efforts was decisively broken early this century when President George W. Bush's administration purged U.N. agencies that were not onboard with U.S. hegemony, especially on interventions in the Middle East.

Through manipulation of funding and selection of key staff members, the Bush administration engineered the takeover or at least the neutralizing of one U.N.-affiliated organization after another.

For instance, in 2002, Bush's Deputy Under-Secretary of State John Bolton spearheaded the takeover of the OPCW as Bush planned to cite chemical weapons as a principal excuse for invading Iraq.

OPCW Director General Jose Mauricio Bustani was viewed as an obstacle because he was pressing Iraq to accept OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, which could have undermined Bush's WMD rationale for war.

Though Bustani was just reelected to a new term, the Brazilian diplomat was forced out, to be followed in that job by more pliable bureaucrats, including the current Director General Ahmet Uzumcu of Turkey, who not only comes from a NATO country but served as Turkey's ambassador to NATO and to Israel. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "U.N. Enablers of 'Aggressive War.'"]

Since those days of the Iraq invasion, the game hasn't changed. U.S. and other Western officials expect the U.N. and related agencies to accept or at least not object to Washington's geopolitical interventions.

The only difference now is that Russia, one of the five veto-wielding members of the Security Council, is saying enough is enough – and Russia's opposition to these biased inquiries is emerging as one more dangerous hot spot in the New Cold War.

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

UN Members Show Spine in Rebuffing Trump

President Trump and Ambassador Nikki Haley tried to bully the U.N. into accepting Trump's decision on Jerusalem as Israel's capital but – in a rare show of independence – most U.N. members pushed back, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

When North Korea began the Korean War with an invasion of South Korea in June 1950, the armed response was waged under the flag of the United Nations thanks to the Soviet Union having absented itself from the Security Council. The Soviets were boycotting the council to protest the fact that China's seat had not been given to Mao Zedong's communists, who had won the Chinese civil war the previous October. With no Soviet veto in the way, the Security Council quickly passed the resolutions necessary to bestow U.N. sanction on the U.S.-led military resistance to the North's aggression.

The Soviets came to realize that they were not going to get support for their contention that the absence of any of the council's permanent members should prevent the council from conducting business. The Soviets resumed their seat and began vetoing further resolutions on Korea. To get around this obstruction, U.S. diplomats led by Secretary of State Dean Acheson persuaded enough other delegations at the U.N. to have the General Assembly, where there are no vetoes, assert the power to take action on matters on which the Security Council was unable to act. That assertion, known as the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, passed the General Assembly in November 1950.

The General Assembly has used this power sparingly, in recognition of how it twists somewhat the division of responsibilities envisioned in the U.N. Charter. The power is appropriately looked at as a last resort in the face of obstructionism by any of the veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council.

The most recent use of the power came this week, with the General Assembly passing a resolution essentially identical to one that the United States had vetoed three days earlier and had been supported by all 14 other members of the Security Council. The resolution was the international community's response to the Trump administration's declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and stated intention to move the U.S. embassy there.

The vote in the General Assembly was 128 countries in favor, nine against, and

35 abstentions. Besides the United States and Israel, the only “no” votes came from some of the Pacific microstates among whom the United States usually gets support when the support is meager (Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau) as well as Guatemala, Honduras, and Togo. Among those casting “yes” votes were major U.S. allies such as Britain, France, and Germany.

It is appropriate and unsurprising that the resolution gained such strong support even in the face of the U.S. administration’s threats and bullying. The resolution does not criticize the United States by name. It instead calls on all members to comply with Security Council resolutions regarding Jerusalem and reaffirms that the status and governance of the city constitute “a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations in line with relevant U.N. resolutions.” Far from being a usurpation of the Security Council’s role, the General Assembly’s action is a declaration of respect for the Security Council’s own prior resolutions, in the face of U.S. flouting of those resolutions.

More Spine Than Usual

Among the principal takeaways from the General Assembly’s action is that an international sense of justice and fairness matters. Many states reject the notion that might makes right, which is how the Israeli government has treated its relations with the Palestinians, and how the Trump administration approached its lobbying on this resolution.

Another conclusion is that, notwithstanding how much the Israeli government and its supporters in Washington would like to think that Arabs don’t care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict anymore and that the only thing that matters to them these days is to confront Iran, that is not how Arab governments (and certainly their constituents in the street) think. Every Arab state supported the resolution. Non-Arab Muslims also care about Jerusalem. Every Muslim majority state except Turkmenistan (which was absent) voted for the resolution.

The administration’s threats and bullying did not work. The crude tactics included U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley’s rhetoric about “taking names” and Donald Trump’s bombast about cutting off U.S. aid. Among the Arab states that supported the resolution were the two states – Egypt and Jordan – that receive more U.S. aid than anyone other than Israel. The very crudeness of the tactics, and the offense taken to bullying, probably made the tactics counterproductive.

More generally, the result of the vote is one more illustration of how much less is the capacity of the United States to push the rest of the world around than those Americans of an assertive nationalist stripe seem to think. This discrepancy between reality and uber-nationalist belief predates Trump and has existed at least since the post-Cold War “unipolar moment” that was barely a

moment, if that. Trump's policies and rhetoric have caused international confidence in the United States to plummet to even lower depths. The United States' pushing ability has dropped along with the confidence.

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.)

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 disasters.



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.)

Trump Bows to Neocons, Netanyahu

Rather than expand U.S. exports to Iran – and create more American jobs – President Trump fell in line behind Israel’s P.M. Netanyahu, decertifying the Iran-nuclear deal and risking more war, as Gareth Porter explains at The American Conservative.

By Gareth Porter

President Donald Trump's new Iran policy clearly represents a dangerous rejection of diplomacy in favor of confrontation. But it's more than that: It's a major shift toward a much closer alignment of U.S. policy with that of the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Whether explicitly or not, Trump's vow to work with Congress to renegotiate the Iran nuclear agreement, and his explicit threat to withdraw from the deal if no renegotiation takes place, appear to be satisfying the hardline demands Netanyahu has made of Washington's policy toward Tehran.

Specifically, Netanyahu has continued to demand that Trump either withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or make far-reaching changes that he knows are impossible to achieve. In Netanyahu's Sept. 19 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Netanyahu declared, "Israel's policy toward the nuclear deal with Iran is very simple: Change it or cancel it." And he made no secret of what that meant: If Trump doesn't "cancel" the deal, he must get rid of its "sunset clause" and demand that Iran end its advanced centrifuges and long-range missile program, among other fundamentally unattainable objectives.

Trump's statement on Oct. 13 managed to include both of the either/or choices that Netanyahu had given him. He warned that, if Congress and America's European allies do not agree on a plan to revise the deal, "then the agreement will be terminated." He added that the agreement "is under continuous review," and our participation "can be canceled by me, as president at any time."

One provision the administration wants Congress to put into amended legislation would allow sanctions to be imposed if Iran crosses certain "trigger points," which would include not only nuclear issues but the Israeli demand that Iran stop its long-range missile program. Ballistic missiles were never included in the JCPOA negotiations for an obvious reason: Iran has the same right to develop ballistic missiles as any other independent state, and it firmly rejected *pro forma* demands by the Barack Obama administration to include the issue in negotiations.

Trump went a long way towards Netanyahu's "cancel" option by refusing last week to certify that Iran was keeping up its end of the JCPOA. That move signaled his intention to scrap the central compromise on which the entire agreement rests.

Although the Middle East is very different today than during the George W. Bush administration, some parallels can be found in comparing Trump's policy toward the JCPOA and Bush's policy toward Iran during the early phase of its uranium enrichment program.

The Likud Wing

The key figures who had primary influence on both Trump's and Bush's Iran policies held views close to those of Israel's right-wing Likud Party. The main conduit for the Likudist line in the Trump White House is Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, a primary foreign policy advisor, and a longtime friend and supporter of Netanyahu. Kushner's parents are also long-time supporters of Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank.

Another figure to whom the Trump White House has turned is John Bolton, undersecretary of state and a key policymaker on Iran in the Bush administration. Although Bolton was not appointed Trump's Secretary of State, as he'd hoped, he suddenly reemerged as a player on Iran policy thanks to his relationship with Kushner. *Politico* reports that Bolton met with Kushner a few days before the final policy statement was released and urged a complete withdrawal from the deal in favor of his own plan for containing Iran.

Bolton spoke with Trump by phone the day before the speech about the paragraph in the deal that vowed it would be "terminated" if there weren't any renegotiation, according to Politico. He was calling Trump from Las Vegas, where he'd been meeting with casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, the third major figure behind Trump's shift towards Israeli issues.

Adelson is a Likud supporter who has long been a close friend of Netanyahu's and has used his Israeli tabloid newspaper *Israel Hayom* to support Netanyahu's campaigns. He was Trump's main campaign contributor in 2016, donating \$100 million. Adelson's real interest has been in supporting Israel's interests in Washington – especially with regard to Iran.

In a public appearance in Israel in 2013, when Adelson was asked about his view on negotiating with Tehran, he suggested dropping a nuclear weapon on a desert in Iran and then saying to the Iranians, "See! The next one is in the middle of Tehran. So, we mean business. You want to be wiped out? Go ahead and take a tough position and continue with your nuclear development..."

The Likud Party policy preferences on Iran dominated the Bush administration in large part because of the influence of David Wurmser, a Likudist who was a Middle East adviser first to Bolton and later to Vice President Dick Cheney. Wurmser was a co-author, with Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, of *A Clean Break*, the 1996 paper that advised Netanyahu to carry out military strikes against Syria and Iran and to remove the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Wurmser convinced Cheney that the administration should seek a pretext for attacking Iran.

But it was Bolton who worked with Israeli officials to plan a campaign to convince the world that Iran was secretly working on nuclear weapons. His goal was to sell key European nations on a U.N. Security Council resolution accusing Iran of developing a nuclear program. Bolton explains in his memoirs that the assumption of his strategy was that either the Security Council would strip Iran of its right to have a nuclear program or the United States would take unilateral military action.

Ratcheting Tensions

In the summer of 2004, a large collection of documents allegedly from a covert Iranian nuclear weapons research program was suddenly obtained by Germany's foreign intelligence agency. Those documents became the sole alleged evidence that such a program existed.

But this writer found more than one telltale sign of fraud in the papers, and a former senior German foreign office official told me on the record in March 2013 that the source who passed on the documents was a member of the Mujihadeen e-Khalq (MEK), the armed Iranian opposition group. The MEK has allegedly worked with Israel's Mossad for some time.

Neither the Bush administration nor the Trump administration viewed the alleged danger of nuclear proliferation by Iran as the priority problem per se; it was rather an issue to be exploited to weaken the Islamic regime and ultimately achieve regime change.

Hilary Mann Leverett, the NSC coordinator in the Persian Gulf from 2001-03, told this writer in a 2013 interview that Wurmser and other Cheney advisers were convinced that the student protests of 1999 indicated that Iranians were ready to overthrow the Islamic Republic. In his statement last week, Trump blamed Obama for having lifted nuclear sanctions on Iran "just before what would have been the total collapse of the Iranian regime."

After Netanyahu became Israeli prime minister in early 2009, his administration worked assiduously for four years to maneuver the Obama administration into giving Iran an ultimatum over its enrichment program. Obama rejected such a proposal, but Bolton has repeated his call for the United States to bomb Iran year after year.

Now the Trump administration is playing out a new chapter in the drama of the Likudists and their patrons in Washington. Their objective is nothing less than using U.S. power to weaken Iran through military means if possible and economic sanctions if necessary. The remarkable thing is that Trump is cooperating even more eagerly than did Bush.

Gareth Porter is an independent journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of numerous books, including *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. Follow him on Twitter @GarethPorter

Nikki Haley Falsely Accuses Iran

Israel and the neocons still seek an excuse to bomb Iran, now citing false claims about its supposed noncompliance with the nuclear deal. The new water carrier is U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that limits Iran's nuclear program, is for Donald Trump one more of the Obama administration's achievements to be trashed. It goes alongside the Affordable Care Act, the Paris climate change agreement, and other measures (most recently the "dreamers" program involving children of illegal immigrants) as targets for trashing because fulfilling campaign rhetoric is given higher priority in the current administration than whether a program is achieving its purpose, whether there are any realistic alternatives available, or what the effects of the trashing will be on the well-being of Americans and the interests and credibility of the United States.

Nikki Haley, whose foreign policy experience has consisted of these past few months as the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, has assumed the role of chief public trasher of the JCPOA for the administration. Evidently no demands on the time of the U.S. ambassador in New York, from the issue of North Korea (which has real, not imagined, nuclear weapons) to the war in Syria were too important to keep her from giving a speech at the American Enterprise Institute that represented the administration's most concerted and contrived public effort so far to lay groundwork for withdrawing from the JCPOA.

Haley has warmed to this cause both because of her own previous parochial interests, including those associated with financial contributions she has received, and because it is a convenient vehicle for playing to Trump's urges. Haley evidently feels no obligation to perform as one of the "adults" in the administration to whom the country looks to contain those urges.

The speech at AEI was Trumpian in some of the tactics it employed. The

performance should cement the ambitious Haley's place on Trump's short list of candidates to become Secretary of State once Rex Tillerson's unhappy and probably short tenure in the job ends. The speech also used more twisted versions of familiar rhetorical twists that have been heard before from diehard opponents of the JCPOA.

One familiar Trumpian tactic is blatant lying. Haley lied when she said that the JCPOA "gave Iran what it wanted up-front, in exchange for temporary promises to deliver what we want." The truth is that Iran had to fulfill most of its obligations first – including disposing of excess enriched uranium, disassembling enrichment cascades, gutting its heavy water reactor, and much else – before the agreement was fully implemented and Iran got even a whiff of additional sanctions relief.

False Reality

There is no correspondence between reality and Haley's assertion that the agreement was a great deal for Iran but "what we get from the deal is much less clear." What we get is a cementing closed (even literally, in the case of the disabling of a reactor that otherwise could have produced plutonium) of all possible pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon. This isn't just a promise; this is major, material, already implemented change.

A rhetorical challenge that Trump, Haley, and the drafters of her speech have faced is how to justify reneging on an agreement that, as the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency have confirmed, Iran is observing. One of the techniques used in the speech was to sow confusion about exactly what Iranian compliance entails. Haley tried to make the subject sound like it is more complicated than looking at the terms of the detailed and laboriously drafted JCPOA and having IAEA inspectors, through continuous and highly intrusive monitoring, determine whether Iran is complying with the terms.

This subject is more of a "jigsaw puzzle," said Haley. "Iranian compliance involves three different pillars," which are the JCPOA, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (which was the international community's formal endorsement of the JCPOA) and the Corker-Cardin legislation that governs the relationship of Congress to the president on Iran policy.

The big problem with Haley's formulation is that Iran is a party to only one of those three "pillars," the JCPOA. The requirements for Iranian compliance are found entirely within the JCPOA. Certainly Iran cannot be held responsible for whatever happens to go into U.S. legislation enacted by the U.S. Congress. Some of the clauses in Resolution 2231 do reflect understandings reached during negotiation of the JCPOA, but the resolution does not incorporate additional

obligations that Iran negotiated and undertook. The much-commented-upon clause regarding ballistic missile activity was carefully and intentionally drafted so as not to constitute a legal obligation.

Haley tried to blur together the subject of missiles with nuclear activities by saying that “missile technology cannot be separated from pursuit of a nuclear weapon.” Yes it can, and it has, not just by Iran but by other nations. Haley’s assertion disregards how, given Iran’s experience in the war launched against it by Iraq, and its situation in facing neighbors today with superior air forces, it is unrealistic that Iran ever would accept curbs on its development and possession of missiles without similar restrictions on others in the region.

Missing the Irony

Most importantly, Haley’s assertion disregards how, in the absence of nuclear weapons, Iran’s missile activity would barely merit an asterisk on any list of U.S. national security concerns. She apparently missed the irony, or the actual lesson that should be drawn, when she followed her comment about missiles and nuclear matters by saying, “North Korea is showing the world that right now.”

If a JCPOA-type agreement for North Korea were in force right now, precluding the development or possession of any North Korean nuclear weapon, Pyongyang’s missile tests would receive a small fraction of the market-shaking attention they receive.

Another technique in the speech was innuendo, in generating suspicion that there are Iranian violations that somehow, despite the intrusive inspections, we don’t know about. One version of the innuendo was the notion that supporters of the JCPOA are so anxious to preserve the agreement that “the international community has powerful incentives to go out of its way to assert that the Iranian regime is in ‘compliance’ on the nuclear side.”

But Haley – who presumably has access to all the classified information on the subject – gave no evidence of any violations, or even any hint of what such an Iranian violation would look like.

Further innuendo about unseen violations involved a topic Haley has talked up on earlier occasions, which is inspection of sites not declared as nuclear sites. She quoted an ill-considered Iranian remark about not giving foreigners the run of Iranian military installations, and strove to create the impression that Iran is denying access to suspect facilities. It is not.

She said nothing about the carefully-defined procedure that the JCPOA lays out for inspection of non-declared sites. If the IAEA is given reason to suspect prohibited activity at any such site, it can request a visit. If the IAEA and

Iran cannot agree on such a visit, the matter is ultimately decided in the Joint Commission – where Iran can be outvoted, and the inspection authorized. There has been no Iranian denial of access, and again Haley provided no reason for suspecting any violations.

Indicting Iran

The speech offered the usual litany of bad things Iran has done through the years, as part of the usual effort by opponents of the agreement to make people feel as hostile to Iran as possible. Never mind that, also as usual, Haley provided no context for any of this bill of particulars or any of the reasons Iran has done what it has done.

The most pertinent lesson that should be drawn from this, and that Haley failed to draw, is that the more concern one has about Iranian activity in the Middle East, the more important it is to keep closed all of its possible avenues to an Iranian nuclear weapon. That's exactly what the JCPOA does.

Haley talked about past Iranian deception and concealment on nuclear matters. Again, she failed to draw the obvious and important conclusion: that this is all the more reason to have the unprecedentedly intrusive inspection arrangement that the JCPOA created. In fact, it is the inspection arrangement, and the assurance it provides, that is probably the most important feature of the agreement, more so even than the specific limits placed on elements of the Iranian program.

The speech used other hoary techniques to confuse and deceive – the use of straw men, for example, to make it seem that supporters of the agreement had misled people.

“We were promised an ‘end’ to the Iranian nuclear program,” Haley said, but all we got was “a pause.” She never identified who supposedly made such “promises,” and never provided any evidence of them having been made. It always was quite clear from the beginning of the negotiations that produced the JCPOA that zero enrichment of uranium was not a feasible goal and that the agreement would be a limitation on a peaceful nuclear program and not the elimination of it.

Haley's speech strongly suggests that at the next due date for certification in October, the administration will, even if it still has no evidence of Iranian violations, withhold certification by taking advantage of a vague clause in the Corker-Cardin legislation that refers to whether continued sanctions relief is appropriate, proportionate, and in U.S. national security interests. The administration will assert, as Haley did in the speech, that this will “not mean the United States is withdrawing from the JCPOA.”

The speech also had a bizarre passage that tries to blame the terms of the agreement itself for death of the agreement, the idea being that re-imposition of sanctions is the only way of penalizing Iranian non-compliance. But if the Republican-controlled Congress re-imposes nuclear-related sanctions, which non-certification would be an invitation for Congress to do, make no mistake: it would be the United States that will have reneged on its commitments and violated the agreement. If the JCPOA dies, it will be the Trump administration that killed it.

Haley claimed to welcome debate about whether the JCPOA is in U.S. national security interests. She asserted that “the previous administration set up the deal in a way that denied us that honest and serious debate.” No it didn’t: there was plenty of debate, including during the enactment of the very legislation to which she referred. If her speech at AEI is an indication, she is not really interested in the part about honesty and sincerity.

Despite all the obfuscation and innuendo and distortions in Haley’s speech, the most important facts about the JCPOA are clear. The agreement is working. Iran is complying with it. The agreement prevents any Iranian nuclear weapon – which, before the JCPOA, those who are declaiming most loudly against the agreement today were saying was their biggest concern. As for all those other things that Iran does and that people don’t like, killing the JCPOA will do nothing to attenuate or prevent them. Killing the agreement will only empower elements in Iran that most favor the sorts of behavior we don’t like.

And reneging on the agreement will deal another blow to U.S. credibility, which Trump already has badly battered.

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