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Why a U.S.-Iran War Could End Up Being a Historic Disaster

A U.S.-Iran war would be the mother of all Mideast conflagrations

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Sixteen years ago, the George W. Bush administration manipulated intelligence to scare the public into backing an aggressive war against Iraq. The smoking gun mushroom clouds that National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice warned against didn't exist, but the invasion long desired by neoconservatives and other hawks proceeded. Liberated Iraqis rejected U.S. plans to create an American puppet state on the Euphrates and the aftermath turned into a humanitarian and geopolitical catastrophe which continues to roil the Middle East.

Thousands of dead Americans, tens of thousands of wounded and maimed U.S. personnel, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, and millions of Iraqis displaced. There was the sectarian conflict, destruction of the historic Christian community, the creation of Al Qaeda in Iraq—which morphed into the far deadlier Islamic State—and the enhanced influence of Iran. The prime question was how could so many supposedly smart people be so stupid?

Now the Trump administration appears to be following the same well-worn path. The president has fixated on Iran, tearing up the nuclear accord with Tehran and declaring economic war on it—as well as anyone dealing with Iran. He is pushing America toward war even as he insists that he wants peace. How stupid does he believe we are?

Naturally, the administration blames Iran for not accepting its supposedly generous offer to talk. However, Tehran has no reason to believe that Washington is serious. One doesn't have to be a hardline Shiite ayatollah to see little point in negotiating with a president seemingly determined on surrender or war—and who can't be counted on to keep any agreement he makes.

Indeed, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently proposed talks without preconditions, other than that Iran needed to behave as “a normal nation” and accede to Washington's many impossible demands even before sitting down at the negotiating table. National Security Adviser John Bolton later explained the president was “prepared to talk about what the future” but only after Iran gave up “their nuclear and other unacceptable activities.” In other words, Iran needed to surrender first. The United States would not negotiate under such circumstances. Why would Iran do so?

The Iranian regime is malign. Nevertheless, despite being under almost constant siege it has survived longer than the U.S.-crafted dictatorship which preceded the Islamic Republic. And the

latter did not arise in a vacuum. Washington did much to encourage a violent, extremist revolution in Tehran. The average Iranian could be forgiven for viewing America as a virulently hostile power determined to do his or her nation ill at almost every turn.

In 1953 the United States backed a coup against democratically selected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. Washington then aided the Shah in consolidating power, including the creation of the secret police, known as SAVAK. He forcibly modernized Iran's still conservative Islamic society, while his corrupt and repressive rule united secular and religious Iranians against him.

The Shah was ousted in 1979. Following his departure the Reagan administration backed Iraq's Saddam Hussein when he invaded Iran, triggering an eight-year war which killed at least half a million people. Washington reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers to protect revenue subsequently lent to Baghdad, provided Iraq with intelligence for military operations, and supplied components for chemical weapons employed against Iranian forces. In 1988 the U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in international airspace.

Economic sanctions were first imposed on Iran in 1979 and regularly expanded thereafter. Washington forged a close military partnership with Iran's even more repressive rival, Saudi Arabia. In the immediate aftermath of its 2003 victory over Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration rejected Iran's offer to negotiate; neoconservatives casually suggested that "real men" would conquer Tehran as well. Even the Obama administration threatened to take military action against Iran.

As Henry Kissinger reportedly once said, even a paranoid can have enemies. Contrary to the common assumption in Washington that average Iranians would love the United States for attempting to destroy their nation's economy, the latest round of sanctions apparently triggered a notable rise in anti-American sentiment. Nationalism trumped anti-clericalism.

The hostile relationship with Iran also has allowed Saudi Arabia, which routinely undercuts American interests and values, to gain a dangerous stranglehold over U.S. policy. To his credit President Barack Obama attempted to rebalance Washington's Mideast policy. The result was the multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. It provided for an intrusive inspection regime designed to discourage any future Iranian nuclear weapons program—which U.S. intelligence indicated had been inactive since 2003.

Although the Obama administration oversold the accord, the JCPOA offered the potential of changing both Iranian politics and the bilateral relationship. Younger Iranians like America and want economic opportunity. Drawing the country into the larger international community would intensify the country's internal contradictions. Had Washington done more to ease Iranian access to Western markets, then pressures for more openness would have risen despite Islamist opposition.

However, candidate Donald Trump had an intense and perverse desire to overturn every Obama policy. His tight embrace of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who ignored the advice of his security chiefs in denouncing the accord, and the Saudi royals, who Robert Gates once warned would fight Iran to the last American, also likely played an important role.

Last year the president withdrew from the accord and followed with a declaration of economic war. He then declared the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a military organization, to be a

terrorist group. (Washington routinely uses the “terrorist” designation for purely political purposes.) Finally, there are reports, officially denied by Washington, that U.S. forces, allied with Islamist radicals—the kind of extremists responsible for most terrorist attacks on Americans—have been waging a covert war against Iranian smuggling operations.

The president claimed that he wanted to negotiate: “We aren’t looking for regime change,” he said. “We are looking for no nuclear weapons.” But that is what the JCPOA addressed. His policy is actually pushing Tehran to expand its nuclear program. Moreover, last year Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech that the *Washington Post*’s Jason Rezaian, who spent more than a year in Iranian prison, called “silly” and “completely divorced from reality.”

In a talk to an obsequious Heritage Foundation audience, Pompeo set forth the terms of Tehran’s surrender: Iran would be expected to abandon any pretense of maintaining an independent foreign policy and yield its deterrent missile capabilities, leaving it subservient to Saudi Arabia, with the latter’s U.S.-supplied and -trained military. Tehran could not even cooperate with other governments, such as Syria, at their request. The only thing missing from Pompeo’s remarks was insistence that Iran accept an American governor-general in residence.

The proposal was a nonstarter and looked like the infamous 1914 Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia, which was intended to be rejected and thereby justify war. After all, National Security Advisor John Bolton expressed his policy preference in a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed titled: “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran.” Whatever the president’s true intentions, Tehran can be forgiven for seeing Washington’s position as one of regime change, by war if necessary.

The administration apparently assumed that new, back-breaking sanctions would either force the regime to surrender at the conference table or collapse amid political and social conflict. Indeed, when asked if he really believed sanctions would change Tehran’s behavior, Pompeo answered that “what can change is, the people can change the government.” Both Reuel Marc Gerecht of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations have recently argued that the Islamic Republic is an exhausted regime, one that is perhaps on its way to extinction.

However, Rezaian says “there is nothing new” about Tehran’s difficult Iranian economic problems. “Assuming that this time around the Iranian people can compel their government to bend to America’s will seems—at least to anyone who has spent significant time in Iran in recent decades—fantastical,” he said. Gerecht enthusiasm for U.S. warmaking has led to mistakes in the past. He got Iraq wrong seventeen years ago when he wrote that “a war with Iraq might not shake up the Middle East much at all.”

Today the administration is using a similar strategy against Russia, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela. The citizens of these countries have not risen against their oppressors to establish a new, democratic, pro-American regime. Numerous observers wrongly predicted that the Castro regime would die after the end of Soviet subsidies and North Korea’s inevitable fall in the midst of a devastating famine. Moreover, regime collapse isn’t likely to yield a liberal, democratic republic when the most radical, authoritarian elites remain best-armed.

Instead of imploding, Iran appears to be repeating its policy of the 2000s. After the Bush administration spurned negotiations, Tehran increased its leverage by adding centrifuges and expanding enriched uranium stockpiles. Only after the Obama administration abandoned its no

enrichment position did negotiations restart. Tehran's recent announcement that it will gradually stop complying with the JCPOA looks like the start of a similar process.

Covert action against Gulf shipping might be another tactic to gain leverage. What is the proper response to this tactic? War requires congressional approval; the 2001 authorization for use of military force that Congress passed after 9/11 won't do. Dredging up long-ignored claims of supposed Iranian ties to the terrorist organization is just a pretext, especially since successive administrations ignored Saudi and Emirati connections to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the Yemen war and the Obama administration aided an Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

More important, Washington does not want to go to war with Iran, which is larger than Iraq, has three times the population, and is a real country. The regime, while unpopular with many Iranians, is much better rooted than Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Tehran possesses unconventional weapons, missiles, and allies which could spread chaos throughout the region. American forces in Syria and Iraq would be vulnerable, while Baghdad's stability could be put at risk. If Americans liked the Iraq debacle, then they would love the chaos likely to result from attempting to violently destroy the Iranian state. David Frum, one of the most avid neoconservative advocates of the Iraq invasion, warned that war with Iran would repeat Iraqi blunders on "a much bigger scale, without allies, without justification, and without any plan at all for what comes next."

Iran also has no desire for war, which it would lose. However, Washington's aggressive economic and military policies create pressure on Tehran to respond. Especially since administration policy—sanctions designed to crash the economy, military moves preparing for war—almost certainly have left hardliners, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who opposed negotiations with Washington, ascendant in Tehran.

Carefully calibrated military action, such as tanker attacks, might be intended to show "resolve" to gain credibility. Washington policymakers constantly justify military action as necessary to demonstrate that they are willing to take military action. Doing so is even more important for a weaker power. Moreover, observed the Eurasia Group, Iranian security agencies "have a decades-long history of conducting attacks and other operations aimed precisely at undermining the diplomatic objectives of a country's elected representatives." If Iran is responsible, observed Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group, then administration policy perversely "is rendering Iran more aggressive, not less," thereby making the Mideast more, not less dangerous.

Of course, Tehran has denied any role in the attacks and there is good reason to question unsupported Trump administration claims of Iranian guilt. The president's indifferent relationship to the truth alone raises serious questions. Europeans also point to Bush administration lies about Iraq and the fabricated 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident used to justify America's entry into the Vietnam War. Even more important, the administration ostentatiously fomented the current crisis by trashing the JCPOA, launching economic war against Iran, threatening Tehran's economic partners, and insisting on Iran's submission. A cynic might reasonably conclude that the president and his aides hoped to trigger a violent Iranian response.

Other malicious actors also could be responsible for tanker attacks. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Israel, ISIS, and Al Qaeda all likely believe they would benefit from an American war on Tehran and might decide to speed the process along by fomenting an incident. Indeed, a newspaper owned by the Saudi royal family recently called for U.S. strikes on Iran. One or the

reasons Al Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks was to trigger an American military response against a Muslim nation. A U.S.-Iran war would be the mother of all Mideast conflagrations.

Rather than continue a military spiral upward, Washington should defuse Gulf tensions. The administration brought the Middle East to a boil. It can calm the waters. Washington should stand down its military, offering to host multilateral discussions with oil consuming nations, energy companies, and tanker operators over establishing shared naval security in sensitive waterways, including in the Middle East. Given America's growing domestic energy production, the issue no longer should be considered Washington's responsibility. Other wealthy industrialized states should do what is necessary for their economic security.

The administration also should make a serious proposal for talks. It won't be easy. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared "negotiation has no benefit and carries harm." He further argued that "negotiations are a tactic of this pressure," which is the ultimate "strategic aim." Even President Hassan Rouhani rejected contact without a change in U.S. policy. "Whenever they lift the unjust sanctions and fulfill their commitments and return to the negotiations table, which they left themselves, the door is not closed," he said. In back channel discussions Iranians supposedly suggested that the U.S. reverse the latest sanctions, at least on oil sales, ending attempts to wreck Iran's economy.

If the president seriously desires talks with Tehran, then he should demonstrate that he does not expect preemptive surrender. The administration should suspend its "maximum pressure" campaign and propose multilateral talks on tightening the nuclear agreement in return for additional American and allied concessions, such as further sanctions relief.

In parallel, Washington should propose negotiations to lower tensions in other issues. But there truly should be no preconditions, requiring the president to consign the Pompeo list to a White House fireplace. In return for Iranian willingness to drop confrontational behavior in the region, the U.S. should offer to reciprocate—for instance, indicate a willingness to cut arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis, end support for the Yemen war, and withdraw American forces from Syria and Iraq. Tehran has far greater interest in neighborhood security than the United States, which Washington must respect if the latter seeks to effectively disarm Iran. The administration should invite the Europeans to join such an initiative, since they have an even greater reason to worry about Iranian missiles and more.

Most important, American policymakers should play the long-game. Rather than try to crash the Islamic Republic and hope for the best, Washington should encourage Iran to open up, creating more opportunity and influence for a younger generation that desires a freer society. That requires greater engagement, not isolation. Washington's ultimate objective should be the liberal transformation of Iran, freeing an ancient civilization to regain its leading role in today's world, which would have a huge impact on the region.

The Trump administration is essentially a one-trick pony when it comes to foreign policy toward hostile states. The standard quo is to apply massive economic pressure and demand surrender. This approach has failed in every case. Washington has caused enormous economic hardship, but no target regime has capitulated. In Iran, like North Korea, U.S. policy sharply raised tensions and the chances of conflict.

War would be a disaster. Instead, the administration must, explained James Fallows, “through bluff and patience, change the actions of a government whose motives he does not understand well, and over which his influence is limited.” Which requires the administration to adopt a new, more serious strategy toward Tehran, and quickly.

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