

Polizette

Washington May Be Inching Toward ‘Regime Change’ in Syria, Iran and Venezuela

Non-interventionists grow concerned as policymakers more actively discuss toppling rogue governments

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The Trump administration and Congress appear to be inching toward policies of regime change in at least three countries — Iran, Syria and Venezuela — in what would be a dramatic reversal of the non-interventionism Donald Trump advocated during the campaign.

In a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on June 14, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson talked about the U.S. supporting “elements” inside Iran that “would lead to a peaceful transition of the government” and Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), who frequently communicates with the White House, said explicitly this month: “The policy of the United States should be regime change in Iran.”

“This is deeply unfortunate,” Cato Institute scholar John Glaser told LifeZette. “It’s literally an impossible task, and it’s appalling to me that the people that are calling for regime change haven’t learned.”

GOP Rep. Predicts Trump Will Order ‘Massive’ Retaliation if Syria Uses Chemical Weapons

The U.S. has spent close to \$4 trillion on intervention in the Middle East and North Africa since 2001 — overthrowing the governments of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and accepting the overthrow of a U.S. ally in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak.

And though most Americans may not know, the U.S. has a history with regime change in Iran.

In 2013, the CIA admitted that it was behind the 1953 coup d’etat in Iran that overthrew the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, to boost the Shah of Iran, an event that turned Iran into a mortal enemy of the United States and the British, who had assisted with the coup, and led to the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

“The Trump administration should ignore calls for pursuing regime change in Iran, and the reasons for this should be obvious,” Daniel Larison, senior editor of the American Conservative, wrote in an editorial on Monday. “First and foremost, the U.S. has no business trying to change

the government of another country. Interference of this kind in the affairs of another country would be deeply wrong."

But is the Trump administration listening?

President Ronald Reagan leaned heavily on the libertarian Cato Institute and its scholars for help in shaping his policies after taking office, but so far, no one from the Cato Institute has been hired to work in the Trump administration, and the administration doesn't seem to be looking for its advice.

"I can't say that we're a welcome voice with the Hill or the White House," said Glaser, adding that Cato has done a lot of outreach to provide the administration and members of Congress with research on public policy issues, but it hasn't heard much back.

And to the alarm and dismay of many conservatives, Elliot Abrams, the biggest cheerleader for the invasion of Iraq as President George W. Bush's deputy national security adviser — and one of two Bush administration officials who helped organize the 2002 coup in Venezuela — was almost hired to be Tillerson's No. 2 at the State Department, something that was stopped at the last minute, reportedly by the president himself.

But it's not just Iran where the U.S. government appears to be considering regime change.

Syria

On Monday, White Press Secretary Sean Spicer ominously warned that the U.S. believes the Syrian government is preparing to launch another chemical weapons attack, and that if it does, Assad and his military "will pay a heavy price." U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley tweeted the same night: "Any further attacks done to the people of Syria will be blamed on Assad, but also on Russia & Iran who support him killing his own people."

These warnings followed a U.S. plane shooting down a Syrian air force jet the week before — over Syria — and the Russian Ministry of Defense's subsequently warning that it would cut the communication channel with the U.S. and that going forward, all U.S.-led coalition planes flying west of the Euphrates River would be considered "targets."

When he was running for president, Trump consistently said the U.S. should stay out of Syria, telling Erin Burnett on CNN in 2015, for example: "Let Syria and ISIS fight, why do we care? What are we doing? Why are we involved?"

But in April, after what the media reported was a gas attack on civilians by the Syrian government, Tillerson said there's "no role" for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to govern Syria going forward, and Haley said: "Regime change is something that we think is going to happen because all of the parties are going to see that Assad is not the leader that needs to be taking place for Syria."

Trump launched 59 Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian air base, but insisted afterward that the U.S. was not going into Syria.

But as some have noted, the U.S. is already in Syria, not only bombing, but on the ground, with more than 2,000 troops, including combat troops.

Venezuela

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who was a strong advocate for regime change in Libya and is also pushing for regime change in Syria, recently introduced a bill in the Senate that seeks to boost anti-regime voices in Venezuela, where Socialist Party President Nicolas Maduro is clinging to power while thousands of people protest in the streets.

The bill, called the Venezuela Humanitarian Assistance and Defense of Democratic Governance Act of 2017, would give \$10 million to Venezuela for humanitarian assistance and allocate another \$10 million for “democracy promotion” in Venezuela, while imposing additional sanctions.

This week, a helicopter dropped grenades on the Supreme Court building in Caracas — the same court whose members the U.S. Treasury Department just sanctioned.

A member of Maduro's Cabinet called the attack part of a "coup plot" and said it had involved four grenades of "Colombian origin" fired from a stolen aircraft.

The U.S. has had a long involvement in the country. In 2002, two officials in the Bush administration — Elliot Abrams and Otto Reich — helped organize and plan a coup that succeeded in forcing out Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. But Chavez returned, and the Bolivarian socialist republic kept rolling along, with Nicolas Maduro becoming president after Chavez's death.

Venezuela is a founding member of OPEC and is thought to have the largest reserves of oil in the world. Chavez nationalized the country's oil industry, limiting the role of multinational oil companies in the country.