



Trump is manufacturing a crisis with Iran, just so he can solve it later

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Last week was arguably the worst seven-day period in the relatively short political life of Donald Trump. Members of his own party joined Democrats, liberals and conservative pundits to condemn the president for siding with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the entire US intelligence and law enforcement community at the Helsinki Summit.

Former CIA Director John Brennan, a lifelong Republican voter, described Trump's words as "treasonous," while John McCain, the GOP's 2008 party standard-bearer saw it as "one of the most disgraceful performances by a US president in living memory". Even a number of talking heads on Fox News - a network that has propagandised Trump's presidency in a way that would make North Korea's state media outlet blush with embarrassment - joined the chorus of condemnation.

Today, Trump woke up to the news that he now has the lowest approval rating of any US president in modern history, going all the way back to Harry Truman, which was soon followed by what can only be described as the tweet of a madman.

"To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!" tweeted Trump in all caps and in the very early hours of Monday morning.

According to a White House spokesperson, Trump was responding to a speech made by Iranian president Rouhani in which he warned the US against blocking its oil exports, predicting such a hostile action against his country would invite the "mother of all wars," which could hardly be construed as meeting the level of what Trump described as the "demented words of violence and death".

Moreover, whatever one makes of Rouhani and the government he leads, he enjoys the support of Iranian moderates, and typically avoids counterproductive sabre-rattling rhetoric. In other words, he's no Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

So, what explains Trump's sudden and middle-of-the-night promise to bring a historic level of suffering to the Iranian people now?

No one can really know that answer to that. The world's greatest psychologist would find it impossible to give meaning to the incoherent and often contradictory ramblings that exit Trump's mouth, or that fill his social media timeline.

One thing, however, we can be sure of: Trump needs a distraction, anything to divert the narrative away from his missteps with Putin. And nothing is more distracting than the threat or promise of war, especially against a country long-demonised in US political discourse.

You don't even need to take my word for it. Instead, you can examine the kind of strategic thinking - if you can call it that - which swims inside Trump's infantile mind. His tweets from 2012 and 2013 perhaps provide some insight into the motives behind his seemingly out-of-the-blue threats against Iran.

"Just as I predicted @BarackObama is preparing a possible attack on Iran right before November," tweeted Trump on July 3, 2012.

"Don't let Obama play the Iran card in order to start a war in order to get elected – be careful Republicans!" tweeted Trump on October 12, 2012.

"I predict that President Obama will at some point attack Iran in order to save face," tweeted Trump on September 16, 2013

"Remember that I predicted a long time ago that President Obama will attack Iran because of his inability to negotiate properly – not skilled!" tweeted Trump on November 10, 2013.

It's clear, then, that Trump sees war as a tool for political expediency.

Ultimately, however, Trump predicted nothing. Not only did President Obama avoid a war with Iran, despite Israel's incessant urging, he negotiated a deal that successfully put an end to Iran's nuclear weapons programme while, at the same time, helping the country re-engage with the international community.

This was the deal that Iran was abiding by, according to the world's leading atomic weapons watchdog, and the same deal Trump walked away from.

The double speak that comes from this White House administration is something to behold. On the one hand it praises itself for engaging in diplomacy to avoid war with North Korea and Russia, while on the other hand it tears up a denuclearisation deal, which was painstakingly

forged by diplomatic efforts between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and threatens war with Iran.

"President Donald Trump is once again issuing bombastic threats of war, this time against Iran," notes John Glasser, director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. "This administration's total lack of a coherent approach to Iran has created a strategic vacuum, wherein US policy is reduced to the hackneyed regime change rhetoric of neoconservatives and the primal screams of an undisciplined, callow president."

Trump's tweet also came the day after his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo gave a speech criticising the Iranian regime for its human rights abuses and authoritarian rule.

While Iran should of course be held to account for its human rights record, Pompeo's words amount to breathtaking hypocrisy, given this administration's unconditional support to the Saudi monarchy and Israel, and Trump's praise for authoritarian strongmen such as Putin and Egypt's President Sisi. Let's also not forget the human rights abuses Trump's administration itself has carried out against refugees on the US-Mexico border.

Ultimately, Trump is manufacturing a crisis with Iran that doesn't exist.

Predictably, he will ratchet up the tension, invoking fears of a catastrophic US-Iran war, and then later hold a summit with his choice of Iranian leaders, bragging about how he brought about peace in a moment of crisis that never existed.

If Trump has demonstrated anything in his first 500 days in office, it's that he is completely unmoored to any norm, ideology, worldview or grand strategy.

Trump cares only for Trump. If it enriches, soothes, lavishes, or betters his station in life, then Trump is all in. Sadly in this instance, however, Trump feels that threatening another war in the Middle East is in his own best interests.