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U.S. Imperialism, Iran and the Context for War

by Margot Patterson



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The Trump administration's efforts to collapse Iran's economy can't be divorced from the history of U.S. imperialism. If Americans remember the 1979 student takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the 444 days in which 52 U.S. diplomats and embassy staff were held hostage, Iranians remember the 1953 CIA coup that brought down the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and returned Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to power.

Deposing the shah, widely scorned as a U.S. puppet, and restoring Iranian sovereignty after a century of foreign domination were central to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Article 1 of the Algiers Accords ending the hostage crisis pledges the United States "not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs." That pledge has been honored more in the breach than in the observance. Iran's insistence on its right to independence and U.S. resistance to that right are at the heart of continuing U.S.-Iranian antagonism. The United States sees Iran as a challenge to the kind of regional order it envisions for the Middle East; the Islamic Republic sees the United States as determined to overthrow the regime and exclude it from the region.

Both countries have big blind spots about the other. Paul Pillar, a 28-year veteran of the CIA now teaching at Georgetown University, said a major U.S. misconception is that Iran is attempting to dominate the region and support terrorism for inexplicable dark reasons of its own. In fact, Iranian policy is much better understood and explained as a set of reactions and responses to what other governments are doing, not least the U.S. government.

“Look at the region and regional behavior,” Pillar said. “Iran didn’t start the wars in Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Syria. Whatever involvement it had in any of those places is a response to something else.”

Since 9/11, Iran has been indirectly allied with the United States in fighting Al Qaeda, the Taliban and, more recently, ISIS. While the two countries have pursued common goals, hostility between them has not abated. The Pentagon has attributed the deaths of 600 U.S. soldiers in Iraq to Iranian-sponsored militias, a new grievance and a statistic recently challenged by skeptics demanding to know the sources for it. Iran’s support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, two groups identified as terrorist groups by this country but national liberation movements by Iran, remains an outstanding bone of contention in the United States, where unqualified support for Israel is backed by a strong pro-Israel lobby in Congress.

Since the Iranian revolution, the United States has persisted in its more or less constant policy of isolating the Islamic Republic, pressuring it economically and attempting to undermine or overthrow it, up to and including during the Obama presidency. During the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq, the United States supported Iraq. It provided Saddam Hussein with military intelligence and support during the war, looked the other way when Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran and blocked condemnation of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons in the U.N. Security Council. In 1988 a U.S. guided-missile cruiser brought down an Iranian civilian airliner flying over Iranian territorial waters in the Persian Gulf, killing all 290 passengers. The United States claimed it was a case of mistaken identity; Iran believed it was intentional.

The 2015 Iran nuclear deal offered a possibility to reset the relationship between the two countries. In exchange for limited sanctions relief, Iran agreed to a moratorium on its nuclear program. In choosing to withdraw the United States from the agreement and re-impose sanctions, President Trump reopened a contentious issue that had been put to rest. “He is the one who has started this escalatory spiral in the region by pulling out of a deal that was working,” said Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, a foreign policy think tank.

The Trump administration’s effort to drive Iran’s oil exports down to zero is the most sweeping attempt yet by the United States to devastate Iran’s economy and trigger regime change. The imposition of secondary sanctions, which threatens access to the U.S. market to foreign companies and foreign countries doing business with Iran, has sent the Iranian economy tumbling and forced the Islamic Republic to resort to asymmetric military measures to break an untenable status quo. Since May, a succession of incidents in the Persian Gulf have ratcheted up tensions between the United States and Iran and raised the risk of a military confrontation.

That may be what key advisors in the Trump administration want. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton are both militarists known for advocating for regime change in Iran. Pompeo has advanced the disingenuous claim that an operational link exists between Al Qaeda and Iran as a way to have the 2001 Congressional authorization for the use of military force that the Bush administration used to go to war in Iraq apply to Iran. At the direction of Bolton, the Pentagon has updated war plans that call for 120,000 U.S. troops going to the Middle East in case of hostilities. An unrepentant war hawk, Bolton is one of the architects of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and urged President George W. Bush to invade Iran as well.

Not a few analysts see parallels between what the Trump administration is doing now and the lead up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. While another U.S. war in the Middle East seems unthinkable, Bolton regards the Iraq invasion differently than do most other Americans, including his boss, Donald Trump, said Trita Parsi, the founder of The National Iranian

American Council and the author of *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* and two books on U.S.-Iranian relations under President Obama.

“John Bolton does not believe the last war in Middle East was a debacle,” Parsi said “He thinks it is a stunning success. While that war obviously did not lead to democracy in Iraq. Bolton does not care about that. The fact that it destabilized the region and spread radicalism has little effect on his analysis. What matters to him is that the United States showed its ability and willingness to use disproportionate force and punish any country that it believed is standing in its way. The end result is that Saddam is no longer there, and as a result the geopolitical chessboard has changed. Iraq is no longer capable of posing a threat to the United States or to any specific ally. The fact that it led to the death of half a million Iraqis, and 4,000 to 5, 000 Americans, is not particularly important in his mindset.”

Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Iran’s regional rivals, all want Iranian power checked, the Islamic Republic isolated, and any opportunity for a U.S.-Iran rapprochement squelched. Slavin and Pillar said the leaders of those three countries, as well as Trump’s biggest donors, are exerting an outsize influence on President Trump, whose decisions on foreign policy are determined largely by domestic politics, personal relationships and economic advantage. Since Trump reached the White House, Iran has been consistently and loudly denounced, accused of transgressions the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United States’ own intelligence community have denied.

Gary Sick, who served on the National Security Council during the Carter administration and is executive director of Columbia University’s Gulf/2000 Project, noted that while the Trump administration constantly excoriates Iran, it never says what Iran can do and why it must be stopped. “They never make that statement because Iran really can’t do very much,” he said. “They can harm us in the region. They can’t touch us here at home. Their threat to us is quite marginal whereas our threat to them is really existential. There’s an attempt to bring down the government of Iran, its whole financial system, their banking system, and commercial, and its ability to produce and export goods.”

“By taking this very, drastic action, we are serving the interests of our allies more than we are the interests of the United States itself,” Sick said. He termed the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear “ a genuine mistake of the first order.”

In their book *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic*, former U.S. diplomats Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett trace the `disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq back to policies first put in place during the George H. W. Bush administration and then continued by Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they note that U.S. leaders felt free to pursue a more openly aggressive and imperialistic agenda. The neoconservatives who promoted and directed the Iraq war have never been held accountable for its failure nor have the liberal interventionists in the Democratic Party who supported them and whose views are only marginally different. The foreign policy establishment is dominated by Imperialists in both parties whose delusional desires for unchallenged global hegemony risk losing the United States its strategic position in the Middle East, the Leveretts write.

Published in 2013, their book argues for a rapprochement with Iran and warns that the same kind of false arguments used to justify war against Iraq are being increasingly used against Iran, in some cases by the same people. Six years later, as the prospect of war with Iran grows more probable, their call for a major reorientation of U.S. foreign policy is being echoed by a few others, Trita Parsi among them.

For the last 25 years a bipartisan consensus has held that the United States can and should possess world hegemony and should view non-democracies that are non-compliant as an intrinsic threat, said Parsi.

“That grand strategy is the root as to why we have so many endless wars,” he said. “It is not a byproduct; it is not an accidental outcome. It is a direct result of this grand strategy and any effort to end the endless wars that does not go to the roots of this is going to be failing.”

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft is a new anti-war think tank that has just been established by billionaires George Soros and Charles Koch. The institute makes similar arguments against America’s “forever wars” and a foreign policy establishment that it calls intellectually lethargic, dysfunctional and unaccountable. According to its web site, the institute will advocate for a foreign policy based on military restraint, diplomatic engagement and the vigorous pursuit of peace rather than on military dominance as an end in itself. The institute is named after President John Quincy Adams, who in 1821 delivered a speech that said America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.”