

A Neoconservative Plan for Punishing Iran

No understanding in the White House of what might come next

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President Donald Trump makes a point of insisting that he has nothing against the Iranian people and is only interested in opposing what he regards as the dangerous activities of their government, but his own record in office belies that claim. It is clear that what he is trying to do is put pressure on the people of Iran to rise up and force a change in government, a process otherwise referred to as regime change. Indeed, if one is to believe Trump confidant Rudy Giuliani, the White House is [now committed](#) to “bring down the Iranian regime.” He added that

“The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Iran is around the corner.”

Giuliani was addressing a Paris meeting of the National Council of Resistance of Iran at the end of June, the political front group for the terrorist Mujahideen-e-Khalq, for which he has been a frequent paid speaker. This dream of an abrupt transition in government is a fantasy project that is widely held within neoconservative and pro-Israel circles in Washington, to include Giuliani, and it very often is invoked as part of what is sometimes referred to as the “Obama betrayal,” which posits that if President Barack Obama had actively supported so-called “green” reformers in the Iranian election of 2013, they might have actually won. That supposition greatly inflates the actual support for the reformers at that time and also currently, confusing a largely civil rights movement with a unified political party.

Obama then went on to sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement with Iran, which has been a target of joint Israeli and neocon wrath ever since. Trump, of course, has risen to the bait and has withdrawn the United States from the deal, also reintroducing both general and targeted sanctions as well as seeking to ban the sale of Iranian oil worldwide.

Unfortunately, as is so often the case, Trump and his advisers, certainly to include National Security Adviser John Bolton, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and Senior Adviser for Policy Stephen Miller, are engaging in the wrong tactics to bring about any what might reasonably be regarded positive changes to moderate the grip of Iran’s Supreme Religious Council and are instead hardening domestic popular support for the government through the threats and sanctions which ultimately accomplish little more than punishing the Iranian people.

Oddly, the White House seems unaware of the fact that Iran is neither Libya nor Iraq. It has a strong and historic national identity that means that it does and will resist being bullied by outside powers, including the “leader of the free world” United States. The neocon and pro-Israel script that has evidently taken control of Trump pushes all the wrong buttons as it basically employs an increasing number and severity of sanctions to seek to wreck the economy and create discord in Iran that will eventually bring people out into the streets in large numbers. That means in practice using not only sanctions that selectively targeting “bad guys” like the Revolutionary Guards but also benign institutions that exist to maintain social stability inside the country.

Reports from inside Iran suggest that the renewed and additional sanctions are already hurting the Iranian people while at the same time having little impact on the government commitment to remain in Syria, which is the principal bone of contention at the moment vis-à-vis the joint U.S./Israeli/Saudi grossly exaggerated and self-serving assessment of what Iran may or may not be doing to destabilize the Middle East.

Two organizations which have recently come under sustained attack by the neocons and their allies are the “Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order” (EIKO) and its associated Barakat Foundation. The EIKO’s [principal mission](#) is to help poor families in Iran and to perform other charitable works, but it [has been assailed](#) as a major economic resource controlled by the Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Khamenei’s office, which misrepresents how the foundation is organized and functions.

Leading the charge against EIKO, inevitably, has been renowned neocon Canadian import and Iranophobe [Mark Dubowitz](#), Chief Executive of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), who has described how the Iranian leadership controls a [vast business empire](#) which must be targeted with U.S. sanctions to punish the government and strip it of the resources [available to make mischief](#).

This campaign, spearheaded by Dubowitz and his associate Saeed Ghasseminejad, has been going on since Trump was elected, with the folks at FDD [confident they had a friend in the White House](#).

Other outlets in the pro-neocon-inclined and friendly to Israel media have also picked up on the theme that Iran must be the target of what amounts to economic warfare. The *National Interest* recently ran [an article](#) advocating the imposition of oil sanctions on Iran in general while also targeting EIKO in particular in order to “change Iran’s behavior,” which is presumed by the authors to be very bad though without any real explanation of why that is so.

And the U.S. Congress is also in on the act. As is nearly always the case, the U.S. House of Representative’s Oversight and Government Reform Committee’s subcommittee on National Security sought expert testimony on how to punish Iran but only looked for speakers who were inclined to take a hard line. They received that kind of [enlightenment](#) from the FDD’s own Richard Goldberg, who is hardly a disinterested observer on the subject.

Goldberg begins by making his case for bipartisan ire directed against Tehran, gushing about how “[he] had the privilege to work with many talented people – Democrats and Republicans – who shared a passion for keeping America and our allies safe from the long list of threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Together, we put forward numerous

bipartisan bills to increase the pressure on Iran. ...It is my sincere hope that we can find a way to resuscitate the bipartisan spirit that once infused this important national security issue.”

Goldberg, who is a bit vague on exactly what kind of “long list of threats” Iran represents, was senior foreign policy adviser to Israel-firster hawk former Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois. He celebrates in his [FDD bio](#) how “[he] was instrumental in the deployment of a U.S. missile defense radar to the Negev Desert – the first-ever full-time deployment of U.S. forces in Israel. In the Senate, Rich emerged as a leading architect of the toughest sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was the lead Republican negotiator for three rounds of sanctions targeting the Central Bank of Iran, the SWIFT financial messaging service and entire sectors of the Iranian economy.”

There has been some pushback against the war-by-sanctions approach currently being advanced by the Trump Administration. [Robert Fontina of Counterpunch](#) has rejected the depiction of EIKO as anything but a charitable foundation. The truth is that EIKO engages in major social projects, including rural poverty alleviation, empowering women, home and school building, and provision of healthcare. American sanctions against it and similar entities hit ordinary Iranians’ lives by producing food insecurity while also restricting the supplies of needed medications. Ahmad Noroozi of the [Barakat Foundation](#) claims that [numerous Iranians](#) have already been affected by U.S.-initiated sanctions directed against his country, restricting access to cancer treatments and other pharmaceuticals. And it is all aimed at fomenting social unrest and ultimately regime change.

Iranian writer [Soraya Sepahpour-Ulrich](#), no friend of the Iranian government, has declared that American sanctions directed against the Iranian economy and people are little more than “sanctioned terrorism.” Her assessment is undeniably correct.

It is indeed disturbing that the abandonment of the rule of law by the Trump Administration and its allies in the media has meant that Washington is resorting more and more to sanctions as an extreme form of punishment in order to enforce its geopolitical demands. Countries that oppose Washington’s policies are now routinely subjected to financial and trade penalties. Cuba, North Korea, and Iran have recently been joined by Russia and Syria as targets of the U.S. Treasury Department. Even America’s European allies and friends are being [threatened](#) if they seek to buy Iranian oil or cooperate with Russian energy initiatives.

The sad fact is that the pretense of U.S. global leadership now consists of a basket of new “rules” that are both arbitrary and basically illegal supported by pretexts that are essentially fabricated. Consider the frequent fallacious designation of Iran as “the world’s biggest state sponsor of terrorism” and the repeated false assertions from U.S. and Israeli government sources that Tehran is secretly building a nuclear bomb. Trump has become effectively the mouthpiece of Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu, with the latter calling the shots. Shortly after Trump had announced American withdrawal from JCPOA, Israel [mounted](#) a series of deadly air strikes against Syria, specifically targeting Iranian military personnel present by invitation in the country to fight ISIS and other terrorist groups. It was an incident that could have rapidly escalated into a broader war, which was clearly the Israeli intention.

There are deadly consequences to following the Israeli and Saudi lead into a possible major war with Iran. If sanctions produce desperation inside Iran, an apparent breakdown in order could easily invite a hypocritical U.S. and Israeli “humanitarian” intervention, possibly escalating into an international conflict, something that the White House appears to not

understand. As is often the case, the Trump Administration has not developed sufficient maturity to appreciate that if one pushes hard against a certain country or group of countries there will be an equally strong reaction, and the results might not be pretty. Punishing the Iranian people without any real understanding of what might emerge in pursuit of nebulous political objectives just might not be a good idea.

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