

# The Path to War with Iran Is Paved with Sanctions

By [Joe Cirincione](#) and [Mary Kaszynski](#)

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*The Trump administration is laying siege to Iran. Taking pages from the Iraq War playbook, senior officials paint a picture of a rogue, outlaw, terrorist regime bent on acquiring nuclear weapons and whose “malign activities” are the cause of all the chaos in the Middle East. They know what they are doing. They have done it before. They are building a case for war.*

The “maximum pressure” campaign by the White House, Treasury Department, and State Department accelerated this week with the announcement that the United States would force China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey to cease all imports of Iranian oil or face severe U.S. sanctions. The goal is to cut to zero all of Iran’s oil exports, which account for some 40 percent of its national income. This strategy is unlikely to force the capitulation or collapse of the regime, but it very likely could lead to war.

The United States has already reimposed all the nuclear-related sanctions lifted by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that successfully rolled back and effectively froze Iran’s nuclear program and put it under the most stringent inspections ever negotiated. The goals of the sanctions announced April 22, however, go way beyond nuclear issues.

“We have made our demands very clear to the ayatollah and his cronies,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#) in remarks to the press Monday morning. “End your pursuit of nuclear weapons. Stop testing and proliferating ballistic missiles. Stop sponsoring and committing terrorism. Halt the arbitrary detention of U.S. citizens.”

All are worthy policy goals. The first, of course, has been met. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iran concluded that Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. There is no evidence that the program has restarted. Instead, in true Trumpian fashion, the administration simply asserts the counterfactual. It claims that the program has restarted, with slippery phrases about seeking weapons or references to long-ended activities. The media, overloaded with the Mueller report and a daily cascade of lies, does not challenge these claims.

## The Role of Bolton

It is no accident that National Security Advisor John Bolton, the man who [declared unequivocally](#) in November 2002, “We are confident that Saddam Hussein has hidden weapons of mass destruction and production facilities in Iraq,” is now the chief strategist behind the drive towards war—with Mike Pompeo happily riding shotgun.

Both are manipulating a distracted and largely uninformed president into a confrontation he may not actually want. Although Trump came into office promising to cancel the JCPOA

painstakingly negotiated by the Obama administration and our allies, he was initially held in check by the united front of his military, intelligence, and diplomatic advisors.

Then, Trump ousted Rex Tillerson and replaced him with Mike Pompeo. He fired H.R. McMaster and appointed John Bolton. He accepted the resignation of Jim Mattis as secretary of defense and replaced him with a former Boeing executive more interested in contracts than policy. Bolton has had a clear field ever since. With minimal or no inter-agency discussion, Bolton quickly dispensed with the Iran accord, but he did not stop there.

By Christmas 2018, Bolton had dismantled what remained of U.S.-Iran relations. The United States reinstated all sanctions on Iran that were previously lifted by the Iran accord, and the State Department pulled out of the 1955 Treaty of Amity between the United States and Iran, which [provided](#) a “legal framework for bilateral relations.” As a result, Iran’s currency hit a historic low and the country witnessed waves of economic protests. Bolton used his national platform to publicly [send](#) bellicose warnings to the regime with statements like, “If you cross us, our allies, or our partners...there will indeed be hell to pay.”

### The Terrorism “Connection”

The “maximum pressure” campaign escalated in 2019. When terrorists attacked the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—an official branch of Iran’s military—killing 27 and wounding 13, the State Department offered no condolences. When widespread flooding devastated Iranian cities and infrastructure, claiming 60 lives in one week, the United States [faulted](#) the regime for the “mismanagement that has led to this disaster.”

The campaign hit a crescendo on April 8, 2019—exactly one year to the day after Bolton’s appointment—with the unprecedented move of designating the IRGC a “Foreign Terrorist Organization.” It now appears alongside the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram on this list. That day Pompeo delivered a statement to the press and public in which the words “terror,” “terrorism,” and “terrorist” appeared 21 times.

This designation brings at least the IRGC and perhaps the entire nation within arm’s reach of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, legislation originally written to provide a legal basis for the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11. The 2001 AUMF gives the president wide scope for the unilateral use of force against any parties or individuals associated with the 9/11 attacks, a point not lost on Pompeo.

For over a year, the Trump administration, and Pompeo in particular, has been exaggerating the connection between Iran and al-Qaeda to claim legal justification for military action against Iran under the 2001 AUMF. In 2017, the CIA released additional records from the bin Laden files, ostensibly “to enhance public understanding of al-Qaeda.” [Wrote](#) former CIA analyst Ned Price:

But this release by Pompeo wasn’t about transparency. Pompeo is playing politics with intelligence, using these files in a ploy to bolster the case against Iran by reinvigorating the debate on its terrorist ties. While the politicization of intelligence is more than sufficient cause for concern, the fact that he appears to be returning to the Bush administration’s pre-Iraq war playbook underscores the danger. This effort reeks of former vice president Dick Cheney’s consistent false allegations of links between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the 9/11 attacks, a nexus the Bush administration debunked only after we had lost too much in

blood and treasure.

Bolton, Pompeo, and their allies in and out of government continued to hype the Iran-al-Qaeda link. In May 2018, announcing the U.S. abrogation of the nuclear agreement, Trump made a point of saying that “Iran supports terrorist proxies and militias such as...al-Qaeda.” In a speech at the Heritage Foundation later that month, Pompeo [said](#):

“Today we ask the Iranian people: Is this what you want your country to be known for, for being a co-conspirator with Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda?”

Experts have [disparaged](#) the administration’s claims, noting the longstanding hostility between Iran, a Shia-majority nation, and the radical Sunni group. A definitive New America study published in late 2018 [found no evidence](#) that Iran and al-Qaeda collaborated in carrying out terrorist attacks. That hasn’t stopped the administration from continuing the insinuations.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Pompeo went out of his way to [construct](#) explicit connections between al-Qaeda and the IRGC with multiple statements like:

“there is no doubt there is a connection between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Al-Qaeda. Period, full stop.”

Invoking the AUMF

Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) zeroed in to the subtext of Pompeo’s repetitive al-Qaeda-Iran connections. If the administration determines a valid link between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government, it may be able to declare war on Iran by using the 2001 AUMF, bypassing Congress entirely. So, Senator Paul pressed Pompeo on that point, asking him if he believes that the 2001 AUMF applies to Iran or Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. Pompeo [dodged](#) the question: “I would prefer to leave that to the lawyers, Senator.” Neither Bolton nor Pompeo has yet provided a clear answer.

The administration’s plan is clear: keep beating the twin drums of terrorism and nuclear threat. Bolton and Pompeo will use both to justify more sanctions and more provocations. They have a highly disciplined, coordinated messaging strategy. They establish the following false claim, as Bolton did this January in a [conversation](#) with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel: “Despite getting out of the Iran nuclear deal, despite the sanctions, we have little doubt that Iran’s leadership is still strategically committed to achieving deliverable nuclear weapons.” The claims are then [echoed](#), as this one was in a Twitter video a few weeks later. And again by U.S. Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, in a *New York Times* op-ed, demanding that Iran “behave like a normal, peaceful nation: end the pursuit of nuclear weapons, stop testing ballistic missiles, stop sponsoring terrorist proxies.” And again this week by Pompeo, in announcing the oil sanctions, when he demanded that Iran “end [its] pursuit of nuclear weapons.”

It does not matter that U.S. intelligence assessments—as well as Israeli intelligence and the International Atomic Energy Agency—[confirm](#) that Iran is complying with the JCPOA. Or that Saudi Arabia has likely [funded](#) al-Qaeda and other Sunni terrorist groups. Or that the US

invasion of Iraq [is](#) the principle cause of Middle East chaos today. Trump officials will cherry-pick information, package it, and amplify it across a willing echo chamber—exactly as the Bush administration did in the lead up to the Iraq war.

The real question is whether America will fall for it again.

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*Joseph Cirincione is the president and Mary Kaszynski is the deputy policy director of the Ploughshares Fund, which provides financial support to LobeLog.*

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**Michel Chossudovsky**

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