

Three Reasons Why ‘Fire and Fury’ Won’t Work with Iran

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Global Research, August 07, 2018

[Truthdig](#) 3 August 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Military](#), [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Featured image: The crew of the littoral combat ship USS Coronado performs a live-fire demonstration of a Kongsberg missile off Southern California. (Naval Warriors / Flickr Creative Commons)

On July 22, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [addressed a crowd of Iranian-Americans](#), giving voice to a new American policy on Iran that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the Iranian government. It would also strangle Iran’s economy through the reimposition of economic sanctions that had been set aside when Iran and five other Western nations, including the United States, came to an agreement in 2015 over Iran’s nuclear program.

According to this agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, Iran accepted sanctions on its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. When President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in May, he promised to reimpose sanctions that had been approved by Congress, including those targeting Iran’s sale of oil. The goal of the Trump administration, Pompeo told the crowd, was to “get [Iranian oil] imports as close to zero as possible” by this November.

Pompeo’s address did not go over well in Tehran. [Addressing a gathering of Iranian diplomats](#), Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani asked,

“Is it possible that everyone in the region sells their oil and we stand idly by and watch? Do not forget that we have maintained the security of this waterway [Strait of Hormuz] throughout history. We have historically secured the route of oil transit. Do not forget it.”

Approximately 18.5 million barrels of oil a day transit through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow channel of water separating Iran from Oman. The loss of this oil to the global economy would be devastating. On July 5, [Rouhani commented](#) on the American plan to shut down Iran’s oil imports, saying,

“The Americans say they want to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero. ... It shows they have not thought about its consequences.”

While Rouhani had remained silent about what those consequences would be, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, made it

clear that Iran would close the Strait of Hormuz to all oil traffic.

“America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars,” Rouhani said, warning the American president not to “play with the lion’s tail, this would only lead to regret.”

President Trump’s response, [delivered via Twitter](#) the next day, caught the attention of the world.

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!

On July 24, the Iranian Armed Forces chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, [responded to Trump’s threats](#).

“As the dominant power in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, [Iran] has been the guarantor of the security of shipping and the global economy in this vital waterway and has the strength to take action against any scheme in this region,” Bagheri said.

“As our president correctly pointed out, the enemies, particularly America, whose centers of interest are within reach of the visible and hidden defense forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, should not play with the lion’s tail,” the Iranian general said, “because they will receive a strong, unimaginable and regrettable response of great magnitude in the region and the world.”

That same day, President Trump [addressed a gathering of the Veterans of Foreign Wars](#), seemingly a perfect venue for offering a bellicose response to the Iranian threats of action. Instead, the president offered up a fig leaf of sorts.

“We’ll see what happens,” Trump said, “but we’re ready to make a real deal, not the deal that was done by the previous administration, which was a disaster.”

The seesawing rhetorical game of threat and counterthreat being played by Trump seems reminiscent of a similar approach taken late last year and early this year with North Korea over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Last August, responding to North Korean threats to test missiles capable of reaching the United States, Trump had [declared](#) that North Korea “best not make any more threats to the United States,” saying that if North Korea disregarded him, “They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” Trump later went on to famously belittle North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, as “little rocket man,” while Kim in turn responded by calling Trump a “dotard” and a “warmonger” whose true nature was that of a “destroyer of the world peace and stability.”

In June, Trump and Kim held a summit in Singapore, where they discussed the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

Many observers believe that Trump is reaching back to his North Korean playbook in engaging in the current hostile exchange with Iran. Iran, however, is not North Korea.

What follows are major reasons why Trump is wrong if he thinks Iran will accede to his demands that it renegotiate a nuclear agreement with the United States to replace the JCPOA.

Reason One: Iran Isn't Breaking the Law

North Korea was in open violation of numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and there was (and is) widespread concurrence that North Korea's nuclear weapons program posed a clear and present threat to international peace and security. While Trump's hostile rhetoric toward Kim Jong Un represented American policy only, he was backed up by a global consensus that the threat from North Korea's nuclear arsenal was no longer acceptable. North Korea was on the wrong side of the law, and it knew it.

Iran, on the other hand, had successfully negotiated a nuclear agreement with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany and the European Union. Its nuclear program today operates in total conformity with the terms of that agreement. The Security Council had passed a resolution undoing the totality of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran because of its nuclear program. Trump withdrew from the JCPOA because of American domestic politics, not because Iran threatened international peace and security. As the United States moves to reimpose sanctions on Iran, one is struck by the number of nations rushing to its side to join in this endeavor: zero.

Simply put, there is no compelling narrative than can be crafted that has Iran walking away from the JCPOA.

Reason Two: Iran Doesn't Have to Win to Win

A war between the United States and North Korea, while potentially devastating for the entire region, had only one sure outcome—total American victory (at a huge cost), and the absolute destruction of the North Korean regime. In short, if Kim Jong Un opted for war with the United States, he would be committing suicide—and taking millions of others down with him. Kim Jong Un is anything but suicidal. He built his arsenal of nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes, not to engage in a self-destructive acquisition of technology. North Korea's ultimate goal has been to break free of the international isolation it has been subjected to; nuclear weapons were a way to secure that outcome. The Singapore Summit occurred because of North Korean initiatives—the Olympic outreach, the meetings with South Korean leaders, and so on. Kim Jong Un was not compelled to go to Singapore—a meeting with an American president was always his ultimate objective.

The Iranian government does not trust the United States and has no desire to engage in diplomatic relations with the United States. This does not mean that the two nations cannot peacefully coexist—they can, and Iran desires as much. But throwing the possibility of a grand bargain with the United States on the table in exchange for Iran giving up its nuclear program is sheer fantasy. As such, any effort to compel Iran into diplomatic engagement by threatening it with war is doomed to fail. Iran learned the lessons of Hezbollah's ongoing conflict with Israel, and in particular that of the 2006 war, all too well. To win the war, Hezbollah did not need to defeat Israel; it had only to make sure Israel did not defeat it. This

is an ambition Iran readily aspires to—it can shut down the Strait of Hormuz, cripple the global economy and ride out any American military response. In the end, the United States will succumb to international pressure and search for a negotiated settlement, and Iran will emerge victorious simply because it survived. Iran would accept this outcome rather than surrender its hard-won diplomatic achievement regarding the JCPOA.

Reason Three: Religious Democracy

North Korea is an absolute dictatorship—Kim Jong Un need only gain the concurrence of his inner circle to move forward on ground-changing policy, such as improving relations with the United States. Even then, any voices of dissent can be—and indeed, have been—summarily silenced. Kim Jong Un has a constituency of one when it comes to getting his policies approved: himself.

Iran is a far more complex problem when it comes to making policy—an Islamic republic governed by a democratically elected executive and legislature whose decisions are subject to review by a theocracy that itself is governed by a constitution and held accountable, via elections, to the will of the people. While Iranian democracy has been openly mocked in the United States as a sham, the fact is that democratic processes have shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran since its founding. The current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has spoken of Iran as being a “religious democracy,” where the people’s participation in the government, expressed through the vehicle of elections, is indicative of the nation’s health (indeed, Iran’s 73.3 percent turnout in the presidential election of 2017, in which Hassan Rouhani won re-election, dwarfs the paltry 55.7 percent turnout in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 that put Donald Trump in office).

The JCPOA that was negotiated between Iran and the West was more than simply an expression of political will by the Iranian leadership—it was an expression of the will of the Iranian people, given voice through countless parliamentary debates and legitimized through repeated elections where the issue of Iran’s nuclear program factored in the balloting. The Iranian people would support its government refusing to bend a knee in the face of American threats; they would not support a government that surrendered their hard-won gains on the nuclear front, which the Iranian people suffered greatly to achieve.

Donald Trump lives in a transactional universe where everything can be dealt away. While this approach might work with New York City real estate and may even have limited application in international affairs, it fails where issues derived from intangible principles—something that cannot be monetized—are at stake. In Trump’s world, one can try to bribe North Korea with the promise of economic largesse or threaten NATO’s viability by placing a dollar value on continued membership. While the ulterior motives of North Korea agreeing—in principle, if not reality—to denuclearize, and NATO to increase its defense spending to 2 percent GDP per member, are probably far more complex than the zero-sum thinking that Trump’s transactional diplomacy suggests, the results are the same. But there can be no transactional diplomacy when the other side refuses to name a price, and Iran has made it clear that there is no price it is willing to accept to give up its nuclear program.

The danger here is that Trump doesn’t realize he is playing a losing hand. His bluff will be called by Iran (indeed, based upon Rouhani’s words, it has been called), but Trump will continue to throw chips into the pot until compelled to either reverse course and rejoin the JCPOA (unlikely), or force the issue and watch the United States enter a war with Iran it will

not lose—but cannot win.

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Scott Ritter spent more than a dozen years in the intelligence field, beginning in 1985 as a ground intelligence officer with the US Marine Corps, where he served with the Marine Corps component of the Rapid Deployment Force at the Brigade and Battalion level.

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