

# Associate Paper

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## Washington Hawks Clamouring to Attack Iran

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### Key Points

- Those pushing for regime change in Iran are overestimating the Iranian people's dislike of their theocratic regime and are mistaking that dislike for a willingness to embrace a foreign invader.
- Like the Bush Administration with Iraq, the Trump Administration appears to have given little or no strategic thought to the future of Iran beyond any possible removal of the clerical regime.
- If attacked, Iran has the capability to retaliate against its neighbours, in a war that could easily spread across the region.
- The security challenges that Iran continues to pose will be best addressed by policy that is formulated using reasoned, expert-based strategic analysis.

### Summary

As US Vice-President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Saudi crown prince and de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman, clamour for a war against Iran, they seem to have conveniently forgotten the destruction and mayhem wrought by the American invasion of Iraq 16 years ago.

These war drummers are underestimating the potential negative consequences of the war and overestimating the Iranian people's dislike of their theocratic regime. They, like the advocates of the Iraqi invasion in 2002 and early 2003, are confusing Iranians' dislike of the ayatollahs with their potential embrace of a foreign invader.

## **Analysis**

On the eve of the Iraq war, former President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, the Vice-President Chief of Staff and Assistant to the President David Addington, all claimed that the Iraqi invasion was aimed at liberating the country from the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein. Removing Saddam from power, they maintained, would eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and bring stability, security and democracy to Iraq.

As developments unfolded over the next 16 years, the “liberation” claims proved to be bogus. The invasion and the decision to de-Ba’athify Iraq and dissolve the Iraqi military created an environment conducive to sectarianism, insurgency and terrorism. The vacuum that followed the regime collapse, the incompetence of the American administration in the “Green Zone” and the pervasive corruption of the new Iraqi governing councils was quickly filled by pro-Iranian militias, al-Qaeda and, later, the Islamic State. The promise of stability and security was replaced by chaos, bloodshed and mayhem.

The massive destruction of Iraq and the horrendous human and material cost that the American “liberation” caused for the country will be child’s play compared to what could happen if Trump and his Israeli and Saudi allies decide to attack Iran. Unlike Iraq – which the British cobbled together after World War One out of the Shia, Sunnis and Kurds under a minority Sunni rule – Iran has been in existence for centuries with a vast territory and a huge population. If attacked, Iran has the capability to retaliate against its neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia. Its air and missile forces could quickly destroy the oil and gas facilities and the water and power grids on the Arab side of the Gulf. A war against Iran could easily spread to the Gulf and the Levant. The entire region could go up in flames.

### ***Hubris and Ignorance***

The Bush Administration was not willing or interested in answering the “morning after” questions regarding the post-Saddam future of Iraq. Whenever I and others urged policymakers to consider the law of unintended consequences and what could go wrong in Iraq following the invasion, Vice-President Cheney and Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld dismissed our concerns and arrogantly claimed that the US military and civilian administration following the invasion would be able to control the situation in Iraq. Their hubris regarding America’s power and their ignorance of Iraqi realities on the ground led to a total breakdown of Iraqi society following the demise of the Saddam regime.

The Trump Administration seems to be equally arrogant and ignorant about Iran. It has displayed a similar disregard for strategic thinking about the future of Iran beyond the clerical regime. The Iranophobes within the administration seem to be more obsessed with Iran than the Bush administration ever was with Iraq.

Instead of relying on calm, expert-based analysis, Secretary of State Pompeo has made a series of trips to the region that have involved bullying, threats, and hilarious, if not tragic, mischaracterisations. In a recent conversation with Christian broadcasters in Jerusalem,

Pompeo waxed eloquent about God's presumed divine plan designating Trump as a possible saviour of the "Jewish people," Sunni Islam, Maronite Lebanon, Alawite Syria and the rest of the world from the perceived modern-day Persian "Hamans."

The American foreign policy process is in serious trouble if Pompeo truly believes that Trump could be the twenty-first-century version of Queen Esther or Hadassah and that this religious vision could chart the path to a grand strategy in the Middle East. When warped religious interpretations are offered as a substitute for rationally debated policy, whether by a radical Wahhabi Salafist, an evangelical Christian, or an ultra-Orthodox Jew, democratic governments should fear for their future. Invoking the divine as an inspiration or a justification for violence against another country, much as Osama bin Laden did on the eve of 9/11, is a rejection of rational discourse and a return to the barbarism of previous epochs.

Pompeo's imagined "shuttle diplomacy" in the Middle East has been reduced to supporting Netanyahu's re-election bid, threatening Hezbollah in Lebanon, recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and lambasting any state that does business with Iran. His ambassador-designate to Saudi Arabia, John Abizaid, told Congress that the threat from Iran supersedes concerns for human rights in Arab autocracies.

Furthermore, Trump Administration policy operatives, including John Bolton and Rudy Giuliani, have treated an Iranian group called the Mujahedin-e Khalq, or MEK, as a legitimate alternative to the clerical regime in Iran. The MEK, however, is a terrorist cult that has received funding from all sorts of dubious sources and is often used as a tool by outside groups, states and organisations, including the intelligence services of regional and international state actors, to further an anti-Iran agenda.

Similarly, the Bush Administration viewed Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi émigré, and the organisation he founded, the Iraqi National Congress, as the legitimate alternative to the Saddam regime in Iraq. Vice-President Cheney and Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld fully bought into Chalabi's snake-oil sales pitch. Chalabi was instrumental in instigating America's invasion of Iraq at the cost of trillions of dollars and thousands of American and Iraqi lives. Iraq has never recovered from that ill-fated, unnecessary war. Bolton and Giuliani are as susceptible to MEK's claims as Cheney and Rumsfeld were to Chalabi's.

For the sake of whipping up regional animus towards Iran and preparing the ground for a war against the "Persian menace," Pompeo, in effect, has told Arab autocrats that, so long as they keep mouthing anti-Iran rhetoric, Washington will ignore their despicable human rights records and the continued repression of their people. The thousands of political prisoners in Egyptian, Saudi and Bahraini jails will have to wait for another day.

Arab regimes have become masters in the art of communicating with their American benefactors. During the Cold War, they received American aid as long as they brandished anti-Communist slogans. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the rise of terrorism, these same strongmen were happy to adopt an anti-terrorism rhetoric in order to continue receiving American military and economic aid. Their current anti-Iran public posture is the latest phase in their communication with Washington and is as equally profitable as the previous two phases.

When some regional politicians demurred about getting tough with Iran, as happened during Pompeo's recent visit to Lebanon, he did not hesitate to threaten them with a panoply of economic sanctions. Vice-President Mike Pence used similar language at the recent meeting in Warsaw to berate and even threaten America's European allies if they dared to take a conciliatory posture towards Iran. The European reaction to Pence's speech showed that his pathetic performance had backfired. Pompeo's Warsaw meeting ended in utter failure.

### ***Iran Nuclear Deal***

Managing Iran's malign behaviour through the Iran nuclear deal or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a stroke of diplomatic genius, which former Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz negotiated. The Obama Administration placed Iran's objectionable behaviour in two baskets: a nuclear basket, which they addressed through the Iran deal, and a non-nuclear one, which the Obama Administration was to address once the nuclear inspection became operational and Iran fully compliant. That approach would have worked: most experts judged Iran to be in compliance with the conditions of the nuclear deal. Unfortunately, President Trump decided not to recertify the agreement.

Trump's decision contradicted the judgment of most nuclear and intelligence experts about Iran's compliance. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), for example, affirmed Iran's compliance in more than a dozen of its successive quarterly reports and as recently as earlier this month.

In his open testimony to Congress in January, the Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, stated that Iran continued to comply with the deal even after Trump announced his intention to scuttle it. Coats said, 'We do not believe Iran is currently undertaking activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device.' Iran was, of course, cheating in other areas, according to the DNI's testimony, but not on the nuclear agreement.

In a statement issued on 25 April of last year, over two dozen Israeli senior military and intelligence officials judged that it was 'in Israel's best interest that the United States maintains the nuclear agreement with Iran.' The Israeli statement went on to say that 'The current deal is better than no deal' and that 'Iran's destructive regional policies and actions, its support for acts of terrorism, its presence in Syria, and its ballistic missiles programme should be dealt with outside the framework of the agreement.' This was precisely the position of the Obama Administration when it negotiated the deal in the first place.

### ***The Path Forward***

Fifty-plus retired American generals and diplomats, in a statement published earlier this month, urged the Trump Administration to re-join the Iran nuclear deal and work on resolving outstanding concerns with Iran diplomatically. They advised against a war because they saw no good outcome. The statement did not seek to exonerate Iran's destabilising behaviour and its involvement in Yemen, Syria, Iraq or Lebanon. Nor did the retired senior leaders ignore Iran's link to terrorism. The statement, however, pointed out, among other

things, that the 2015 nuclear deal ‘put limitations on Iran’s nuclear programme that provided assurances that it would not be used to develop weapons, improved American intelligence about potential future development and significantly improved the security of the United States and our allies.’

Additionally, the retired generals and diplomats emphasised that Iran is complying with the agreement and that, under the JCPOA, Iran is barred from engaging in a nuclear weapons development programme, which prevents it from producing a nuclear device. ‘Re-entering the agreement and lifting the sanctions will greatly enhance United States’ ability to negotiate improvements and enable us to address concerns with the existing agreement.’

Coming from these military and policy realists, who are dedicated to the security of the US, Israel and America’s allies, this advice is grounded in sane strategic analysis, not in theological whimsy.

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**About the Author:** Dr Emile Nakhleh was a Senior Intelligence Service officer and Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Programme at the Central Intelligence Agency. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a Research Professor and Director of the Global and National Security Policy Institute at the University of New Mexico, and the author of *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America’s Relations with the Muslim World*, *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing State*, and *The Persian Gulf and American Policy*. He has written extensively on Middle East politics, political Islam, radical Sunni ideologies and terrorism. He is also a Board Member of the World Affairs Council of Albuquerque. His recent writings on terrorism and contemporary regional politics are posted on [LobeLog.com](http://LobeLog.com) and on *The Cipher Brief*. Emile received his BA in Political Science from St. John’s University (Minnesota), his MA in Political Science from Georgetown University, and PhD in International Relations from the American University. He and his wife live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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