

October Surprise: Will War with Iran be Trump's Election Eve Shocker?

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Was Donald Trump's January 3rd [drone assassination](#) of Major General Qasem Soleimani the first step in turning the simmering Cold War between the United States and Iran into a hot war in the weeks before an American presidential election? Of course, there's no way to know, but behind by double digits in most national polls and flanked by ultra-hawkish Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Trump is a notoriously impetuous and erratic figure. In recent weeks, for instance, he didn't hesitate to dispatch federal paramilitary forces to American cities run by Democratic mayors and his administration also seems to have launched a series of covert actions against Tehran that look increasingly overt and have Iran watchers concerned about whether an [October surprise](#) could be in the cards.

Much of that concern arises from the fact that, across Iran, things have been blowing up or catching fire in ways that have seemed both mysterious and threatening. Early last month, for instance, a suspicious [explosion](#) at an Iranian nuclear research facility at Natanz, which is also the site of its centrifuge production, briefly grabbed the headlines. Whether the site was severely damaged by a bomb smuggled into the building or some kind of airstrike remains unknown. "A Middle Eastern intelligence official said Israel planted a bomb in a building where advanced centrifuges were being developed," [reported](#) the *New York Times*. Similar fiery events have been plaguing the country for weeks. On June 26th, for instance, there was "a huge [explosion](#) in the area of a major Iranian military and weapons development base east of Tehran." On July 15th, seven ships [caught fire](#) at an Iranian shipyard. Other mysterious fires and explosions have hit industrial facilities, a power plant, a missile production factory, a medical complex, a petrochemical plant, and other sites as well.

"Some officials say that a joint American-Israeli strategy is evolving — some might argue regressing — to a series of short-of-war clandestine strikes," [concluded](#) another report in the *Times*.

Some of this sabotage has been conducted against the backdrop of a two-year-old "very aggressive" CIA action plan to engage in offensive cyber attacks against that country. As a [Yahoo! News investigative report](#) put it:

"The Central Intelligence Agency has conducted a series of covert cyber operations against Iran and other targets since winning a secret victory in 2018 when President Trump signed what amounts to a sweeping authorization for such activities, according to former U.S. officials with direct knowledge of the matter... The finding has made it easier for the CIA to damage adversaries' critical infrastructure, such as petrochemical plants."

Meanwhile, [on July 23rd](#), two U.S. fighter jets buzzed an Iranian civilian airliner in Syrian airspace, causing its pilot to swerve and drop altitude suddenly, injuring a number of the plane's passengers.

For many in Iran, the drone assassination of Soleimani — and the campaign of sabotage that followed — has amounted to a virtual declaration of war. The equivalent to the Iranian major general's presidentially ordered murder, according to some analysts, would have been Iran assassinating Secretary of State Pompeo or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, although such analogies actually understate Soleimani's stature in the Iranian firmament.



In its aftermath, Iran largely held its fire, its only response being a [limited, telegraphed strike](#) at a pair of American military bases in Iraq. If Soleimani's murder was intended to draw Iran into a tit-for-tat military escalation in an election year, it failed. So perhaps the U.S. and Israel designed the drumbeat of attacks against critical Iranian targets this summer as escalating provocations meant to goad Iran into retaliating in ways that might provide an excuse for a far larger U.S. response.

Such a conflict-to-come would be unlikely to involve U.S. ground forces against a nation several times larger and more powerful than Iraq. Instead, it would perhaps involve a sustained campaign of airstrikes against dozens of Iranian air defense installations and other military targets, along with the [widespread network of facilities](#) that the United States has identified as being part of that country's nuclear research program.

The “Art” of the Deal in 2020

In addition to military pressure and fierce sanctions against the Iranian economy, Washington has been cynically trying to take advantage of the fact that Iran, already in a weakened state, has been especially hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Those American sanctions have, for instance, made it far harder for that country to get the economic support and medical and humanitarian supplies it so desperately needs, given its soaring death count.

According to a [report by the European Leadership Network](#),

“Rather than easing the pressure during the crisis, the U.S. has applied four more rounds of sanctions since February and contributed to the derailing of Iran's application for an IMF [International Monetary Fund] loan. The three special financial instruments designed to facilitate the transfer of humanitarian aid to Iran in the face of secondary sanctions on international banking

transactions... have proven so far to have been one-shot channels, stymied by U.S. regulatory red tape.”

To no avail did Human Rights Watch [call on](#) the United States in April to ease its sanctions in order to facilitate Iran’s ability to grapple with the deadly pandemic, which has officially [killed nearly 17,000](#) people since February (or possibly, if a [leaked account](#) of the government’s actual death figures is accurate, nearly 42,000).

Iran has every reason to feel aggrieved. At great political risk, President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei agreed in 2015 to a deal with the United States and five other world powers over Iran’s nuclear research program. That accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), accomplished exactly what it was supposed to do: it led Iran to make significant concessions, cutting back both on its nuclear research and its uranium enrichment program in exchange for an easing of economic sanctions by the United States and other trade partners.

Though the JCPOA worked well, in 2018 President Trump unilaterally withdrew from it, reimposed far tougher sanctions on Iran, began what the administration called a [campaign of “maximum pressure”](#) against Tehran, and since assassinating Soleimani has apparently launched military actions just short of actual war. Inside Iran, Trump’s confrontational stance has helped [tilt politics to the right](#), undermining Rouhani, a relative moderate, and eviscerating the reformist movement there. In [elections](#) for parliament in February, ultraconservatives and hardliners swept to a [major victory](#).



But the Iranian leadership can read a calendar, too. Like voters in the United States, they [know](#) that the Trump administration is probably going to be voted out of office in three months. And they know that, in the event of war, it’s more likely than not that many Americans — including, sadly, some hawkish Democrats in Congress, and influential analysts at middle-of-the-road Washington think tanks — will rally to the White House. So unless the campaign of covert warfare against targets in Iran were to intensify dramatically, the Iranian leadership isn’t likely to give Trump, Pompeo, and crew the excuse they’re looking for.

As evidence that Iran’s leadership is paying close attention to the president’s electoral difficulties, Khamenei only recently rejected in the most explicit terms possible what most observers believe is yet another cynical ploy by the American president, when he suddenly asked Iran to reengage in direct leader-to-leader talks. In a [July 31st speech](#), the Iranian leader replied that Iran is well aware Trump is seeking only sham talks to help him in November. (In June, [Trump tweeted](#) Iran: “Don’t wait until after the U.S. Election to make the Big deal! I’m going to win!”) Indeed, proving that Washington has no intention of negotiating with Iran in good faith, after wrecking the JCPOA and ratcheting up sanctions,

the Trump administration announced an onerous list of [12 conditions](#) that would have to precede the start of such talks. In sum, they amounted to a demand for a wholesale, humiliating Iranian surrender. So much for the art of the deal in 2020.

October Surprises, Then and Now

Meanwhile, the United States isn't [getting much support](#) from the rest of the world for its thinly disguised effort to create chaos, a possible uprising, and the conditions to force regime change on Iran before November 3rd. At the United Nations, when Secretary of State Pompeo called on the Security Council to [extend an onerous arms embargo](#) on Iran, not only did Russia and China promise to veto any such resolution but America's European allies opposed it, too. They were particularly offended by Pompeo's threat to impose "snapback" economic sanctions on Iran as laid out in the JCPOA if the arms embargo wasn't endorsed by the council. Not lost on the participants was the fact that, in justifying his demand for such new U.N. sanctions, the American secretary of state was invoking the very agreement that Washington had unilaterally abandoned. "Having quit the JCPOA, the U.S. is no longer a participant and has no right to trigger a snapback at the U.N.," was the way [China's U.N. ambassador](#) put it.

That other emerging great power has, in fact, become a major spoiler and Iranian ally against the Trump administration's regime-change strategy, even as its own relations with Washington [grow grimmer](#) by the week. Last month, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that Iran and China had inked "a sweeping economic and security partnership that would clear the way for billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors, undercutting the Trump administration's efforts to isolate the Iranian government." The 18-page document reportedly calls for closer military cooperation and a \$400 billion Chinese investment and trade accord that, among other things, takes direct aim at the Trump-Pompeo effort to cripple Iran's economy and its oil exports.

According to [Shireen Hunter](#), a veteran Middle Eastern analyst at Georgetown University, that accord should be considered a world-changing one, as it potentially gives China "a permanent foothold in Iran" and undermines "U.S. strategic supremacy in the [Persian] Gulf." It is, she noted with some alarm, a direct result of Trump's anti-Iranian obsession and Europe's reluctance to confront Washington's harsh sanctions policy.

On June 20th, in a [scathing editorial](#), the *Washington Post* agreed, ridiculing the administration's "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran. Not only had the president failed to bring down Iran's government or compelled it to change its behavior in conflicts in places like Syria and Yemen, but now, in a powerful blow to U.S. interests, "an Iranian partnership with China... could rescue Iran's economy while giving Beijing a powerful new place in the region."

If, however, the traditional Washington foreign policy establishment believes that Trump's policy toward Iran is [backfiring](#) and so working against U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf, his administration seems not to care. As evidence mounts that its approach to Iran isn't having the intended effect, the White House continues apace: squeezing that country economically, undermining its effort to fight Covid-19, threatening it militarily, [appointing](#) an extra-hardliner as its "special envoy" for Iran, and apparently ([along with Israel](#)) carrying out a covert campaign of terrorism inside the country.

Over the past four decades, "October surprise" has evolved into a catch-all phrase meaning

any unexpected action by a presidential campaign just before an election designed to give one of the candidates a surprise advantage. Ironically, its origins lay in Iran. In 1980, during the contest between President Jimmy Carter and former California Governor Ronald Reagan, rumors surfaced that Carter might stage a raid to rescue scores of American diplomats then held captive in Tehran. (He didn't.) According to other reports, the Reagan campaign had made clandestine contact with Tehran aimed at persuading that country not to release its American hostages until after the election. (Two books, [October Surprise](#) by Gary Sick, a senior national security adviser to Carter, and [Trick or Treason](#) by investigative journalist Bob Parry delved into the possibility that candidate Reagan, former CIA Director Bill Casey, and others had engaged in a conspiracy with Iran to win that election.)

Consider it beyond irony if, this October, the latest election "surprise" were to take us back to the very origins of the term in the form of some kind of armed conflict that could only end terribly for everyone involved. It's a formula for disaster and like so many other things, when it comes to Donald J. Trump, it can't be ruled out.

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