

Pompeo, Bolton, and Iran's "Fake Opposition"

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As Iranian people struggle for democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as preserving the national security and territorial integrity of their country, two main groups have emerged among the opposition to Iran's hardliners, both within Iran and in the diaspora. One group, the true opposition that includes the reformists, [religious-nationalists](#), secular leftists, various labor groups, human rights activists, and others, believes that it is up to the Iranian people living in Iran how to change the political system in their country. This group is opposed to foreign intervention, particularly by the United States and its allies, the illegal economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran, and the constant threats of military confrontation espoused by John Bolton, President Trump's national security advisor, and other Iran hawks.

Many Iranians refer to the second group as the "fake" opposition. It consists mostly of the monarchists, some ethnic groups, and the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), the exiled group that is universally despised in Iran and was on the State Department's list of "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" from 1997 until 2011. It is called the "fake" opposition because it supports the economic sanctions and the threat of military attacks, and has completely aligned itself not only with the Trump administration, but also with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel, and endorses their propaganda against Iran. This group, whose followers are based mostly in the diaspora, acts more like a lobby for convincing the Iranian people to support the Trump-Mohammed bin Salman(MbS)-Benjamin Netanyahu triangle in their confrontation with Iran, rather than as a group supporting the true opposition within Iran for lasting, irreversible, and positive changes in the political system.

The harsh economic sanctions imposed on the Iranian people have contributed significantly to the terrible state of Iran's economy, increasing inflation and unemployment, making vital [drugs and medications scarce](#), and hurting the [middle class greatly](#). These groups' support for the hostility of Saudi Arabia, Israel, and UAE toward Iran is particularly galling at a time when Saudi Arabia has threatened "[to take the war to inside Iran](#)," Israel came close numerous times [to attacking Iran](#) from 2010-2011 and is still threatening it, and the UAE welcomed the [terrorist attacks in Ahvaz](#) in southern Iran last September.

The Secessionist Ethnic Groups

Although National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) supports the MEK and [has met with its leader](#) repeatedly, Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) and Brian Hook, the State Department's Special Representative for Iran who directs the "[Iran Action Group](#)," [have met](#) with some of the leaders of the "fake" opposition. Last June, [Abdullah Mohtadi](#) and [Mustafa Hijri](#) who lead, respectively, the Iranian Communist Kurdish group Komala and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), [traveled to Washington](#), with Mohtadi reportedly [meeting with Pompeo](#) and Hijri [meeting with](#) other the State Department officials. Komala's office in Washington

[has registered](#) with the Justice Department as a lobbying group intending to “establish solid and durable relations” with the Trump administration. Before he was appointed the president’s national security advisor, Bolton [published a white paper](#) that included a call for supporting “Kurdish national aspirations, including Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Syria,” and for providing “assistance to Balochis, Khuzestan Arabs, Kurds” and other ethnic minorities in Iran.

Both groups [have carried out armed attacks](#) on Iran’s military inside Iran, which amount to terrorism. Both have separatist tendencies, which they conceal under the guise of calling for a federal system that would partition the country into various regions based on ethnicity. The separatist nature of the KDPI became clear when, in 2012, Hijri asked the United States to declare Iran’s Kurdistan province a “[no-fly zone](#)” so that his forces could attack government forces freely and eventually secede from Iran. Hijri [has also called](#) for “regime change” in Iran, declared the Islamic Republic “[a common enemy](#)” of the Kurds and Israel, and asked the Jewish state for support.

Identifying Iranian Ahmed Chalabis

One goal of the meetings between Pompeo, Bolton, and the exiled “fake” opposition is to identify those Iranians who have the potential to act as the Iranian version of [Ahmad Chalabi](#). This notorious Iraqi figure, whose Iraqi National Congress for years fabricated lies about Saddam Hussein’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction, worked closely with the neoconservatives in the run-up to the 2003 invasion. Another goal is to buttress the claim that the Iranian people support Trump’s policy vis-à-vis Iran.

One leading candidate is Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran’s last king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi whose regime was overthrown by the 1979 Revolution. In the 1980s, the [CIA provided](#) Reza Pahlavi with funding. He has also had a [long-term relationship](#) with Israel and the Israel lobby in the United States, including meeting [with Sheldon Adelson](#), the casino magnate and billionaire Republican donor who once suggested that the United States attack Iran with [nuclear bombs](#). Reza Pahlavi [has also called](#) on Israel to help the “cause of democracy” in Iran.

Efforts to prop up Reza Pahlavi began immediately after Donald Trump’s election in November 2016, even before he formally took office. Suddenly, the Farsi division of Voice of America (VOA), as well as Radio Farda, a U.S. funded radio program, began promoting Reza Pahlavi as the “leader” of the opposition. [Setareh Derakhshesh](#), director of VOA’s Farsi programs, [interviewed Pahlavi](#), and both VOA and Radio Farda began presenting a very “modern” and [positive portrait](#) of Pahlavi and his family, a depiction that [has continued](#).

In addition, Derakhshesh also interviewed several Iran hawks, including [Bolton](#). She also interviewed [Elliot Abrams](#), who served in George W. Bush’s National Security Council and is an ardent opponent of the nuclear agreement with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA), and [Michael Ledeen](#), a veteran anti-Iran neoconservative at the [Foundation for Defense of Democracies \(FDD\)](#), a leading [anti-JCPOA group closely associated with Israel’s Likud Party](#). Both Abrams and Ledeen support Trump’s policy toward Iran. VOA also hired [Masih Alinejad](#), a controversial reporter who has turned against the Reformists in Iran, to begin her own program on VOA, giving her [large sums of money](#) and promoting her heavily.

In addition, VOA's programs stopped interviewing the Reformist figures in the Iranian diaspora or in Tehran. Several Iranian staff members who ran various VOA Farsi programs and were not comfortable with the sudden change of direction, [either left VOA](#) or moved to positions off camera.

The New Pro-War Group

Another “fake” opposition group that has emerged over the past several months and is closely linked with the Trump administration and the neocons is called *Farashgard* (“revival” in ancient Persian). Its leading member is [Amir Etemadi](#) who, together with Saeed Ghassemnejad, co-founded the so-called “Iranian Liberal Students Group” (ILSG), a small ultra-right group of student activists in Iran, most of whom moved to Canada and the United States and supported George W. Bush’s policy toward Iran. Ghassemnejad is now “senior adviser on Iran” [at the FDD](#). [In his Twitter account](#), Ghassemnejad refers to himself as a “classical liberal and non-partisan,” despite calling for the execution of the Islamic Republic’s leaders after regime change and working for the very partisan FDD.

Farashgard consists of 40 relatively young activists—most of whom are members of the ILSG—who have called for “regime change” in Iran, supported Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign against their native land, and promoted Reza Pahlavi as the leader of the opposition. Before the group announced its existence in September 2018, many of its members [had signed a letter](#) in December 2016 in which they declared the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic State (ISIS or IS) “two sides of the same coin”—never mind that Iran played a leading role in defeating IS in Iraq and Syria. The letter also urged then President-elect Trump to take on the Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) throughout the Middle East “by all available means” and help “the Iranian people to take back their country from the Islamic gang which has been in charge for the last four decades...” Echoing Bolton’s and Pompeo’s claim that Iran’s ballistic missile program is “a threat not only to the region but to the world,” they asked Trump to pressure Iran to stop its missile program, and impose tough economic sanctions that would hurt the Iranian people, not the regime

“New Iran” Foundation

A few months ago, a new Iran “think thank” popped up called [New Iran](#) (TNI), led by Alireza Nader, [formerly of the Rand Corporation](#). TNI [claims to be](#) “a nonprofit and nonpartisan 501(c)3 organization dedicated to the objective research and analysis of Iran.” But Nader has recently been more involved in political development than analysis. In late [December 2017 and early January 2018](#), when demonstrations against the terrible state of the economy broke out in several cities throughout Iran, Nader was highly active on [Twitter](#), trying to encourage more demonstrations—see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), for example—while working at Rand under a contract from the U.S. government.

Nader apparently left Rand a short time after those demonstrations, and suddenly TNI emerged with offices at a pricey Washington address and six permanent staff. The few analyses that TNI members, including Nader himself, have published—see [here](#) and [here](#), for example—indicate that they support the Trump/Pompeo/Bolton approach to Iran. This is in fact Nader’s *modus operandi*. A review of his writings over the years shows that he generally changes positions as the U.S. administrations do and tries to align with whoever is in power.

In addition to supporting Trump’s Iran policy, Farashgard and TNI are also closely linked to

the neoconservatives, the Israel lobby, and others. For example, a member of the board of directors of the TNI, [Nader Uskowi](#), was a leftist student activist before the Iranian revolution and has worked at the [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), an offshoot of the American Israeli Political Affairs Committee. Another member of TNI's board is [Thomas Parker](#) who [is also listed](#) as a security expert on the website of the Washington Institute and has written for them in the past.

[In a recent article](#), Uskowi seemingly praised Farashgard. In addition, Shay Khatiri, a [researcher at TNI](#), is also a member of Farashgard, and in his Twitter account proudly describes himself as "[the new Paul Wolfowitz](#)," the discredited neoconservative former deputy Pentagon chief under George W. Bush and one of the key architects of 2003 invasion of Iraq. A picture shows him shaking hands with the late Senator John McCain, an Iran hawk who sang infamously "[bomb, bomb, bomb Iran](#)." His page on the TNI website [claims that](#) "he has researched Iranian politics, history, and public opinion at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the [American Enterprise Institute](#)," whose "scholars" have included Wolfowitz, Bolton, Ledeen, and other Iraq and Iran hawks. Another TNI adviser, [Sharon Nazarian](#), is "senior vice president of international affairs" [at the Anti-Defamation League](#), a civil-rights group that [is strongly pro-Israel](#) and that has also long supported [a confrontational stance towards Iran](#).

According to [documents filed online by](#) the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political arm of the MEK, Uskowi has repeatedly met with NCRI's Alireza Jafarzadeh. Iranians [consider](#) Jafarzadeh the "foreign minister" of the MEK leader, Maryam Rajavi.

Bolton and Trump's personal attorney, [Rudy Giuliani](#), have been long-time lobbyists for the MEK, receiving [large fees](#) for their lobby activities. Both [Bolton](#) and [Giuliani](#) have also called for "regime change" in Iran.

It's not clear where TNI and other "fake" opposition groups receive their funding. The Gulf States, however, have made clear their their willingness to pay for anti-Iranian activities. Last November, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that, in March 2017, intelligence and military officials of Saudi Arabia discussed a \$2 billion plan to destabilize Iran and assassinate its top officials, including Major General [Qasem Soleimani](#), the commander of Iran's Quds force.

No Significant Social Base of Support

One of the most important aspects of all such groups is that they have no significant social base of support within Iran. Even in the diaspora a large majority of Iranians, while opposing the clerics in Iran, reject economic sanctions, military threats, and these groups' support for the anti-Iranian policy of the Trump-MbS-Netanyahu triangle. Within Iran, the hostility of the triangle has actually transformed the generally pro-West Iranians into strong opponents of the three countries, to the point of despising the three leaders and their governments.

Farhad Meysami, a medical doctor and human rights activist who has been imprisoned by the hardliners in Tehran and has even gone [on hunger strike](#), criticized harshly the Trump administration in an open letter distributed widely on the Internet. He accused Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo of shedding "crocodile tears" for him and other jailed political and human rights activists, [writing](#):

I was paging through a newspaper when I suddenly caught a glimpse of a story and got riveted to the spot. Apparently, [Donald] Trump's State Department

has called for the “freedom” of this humble civil activist. Actually, I prefer to serve my whole life in jail at the hands of a group of wrongdoing compatriot oppressors and spend it endeavoring to rectify their mistakes, rather than be subject to the stigma of “deal-breakers’ support” [a reference to the Trump administration leaving the JCPOA illegally].

Meysami ended his letter by saying, “I request the likes of Trump, Pompeo and Bolton to shed their crocodile tears for human rights elsewhere.”

After promoting Reza Pahlavi heavily, Farashgard [called](#) on the Iranian people to go on strike and demonstrate on the anniversary of last year’s scattered demonstrations, particularly on December 28 and January 7. No significant demonstration took place anywhere in Iran, hence demonstrating the absence of any social support within Iran for the monarchists, Reza Pahlavi, and their promoters. It also demonstrated these groups’ complete ignorance of Iran’s realities. The lack of support for the demonstrations was so embarrassing that it ignited a fierce internal debate among the monarchists about the wisdom of such calls.

All Iranians despise the MEK for collaborating with Saddam Hussein and Iraq during the war with Iran in the 1980s, for [revealing information](#) on Iran’s nuclear program and facilities, for working [with Saudi Arabia](#), and for [collaborating with Israel](#) in the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

The Poland Summit

In January, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announced](#) a summit in Poland on February 13-14 to build a global coalition against Iran. The idea, according to Pompeo, is to “focus on Middle East stability and peace and freedom and security here in this region, and that includes an important element of making sure that Iran is not a destabilizing influence.” Poland’s Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz said in a statement that 70 countries, including all 28 members of the European Union, have been invited.

A well-placed Iranian activist told the author that, in the run-up to the summit in Poland, Pompeo has invited several figures from the Iranian “fake” opposition to Washington for “consultation.” The apparent purpose is either to select some of them to take to Poland to speak “on behalf of the Iranian people,” to prepare some sort of “manifesto” on what the Iranian people want, or both. In fact, on February 4, [Pompeo met with the VOA’s Alinejad](#) and “underscored the United States’ commitment to help amplify the voices of the Iranian people and to condemn the Iranian regime for its ongoing human rights abuses.” This is while the United States continues to support Saudi Arabia and Egypt, countries that are gross violators of the human rights of their own citizens.

After re-imposing harsh and illegal economic sanctions on Iran, threatening Iran repeatedly, and banning most Iranians from traveling to the United States, the Trump administration, in collaboration with the “fake” Iranian opposition, [sheds crocodile tears](#) for the Iranian people. In Iran, meanwhile, the people struggle daily on two fronts. They continue to survive the sanctions and threats, and the rampant corruption of the hardliners. And they continue to pressure these same hardliners to stop the repression, open up the political space, and allow for free and fair elections.

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