

# Trump's March to War with Iran

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*There is a very real possibility that Donald Trump will start a new war in the Middle East. If that's not his intention, then his administration is doing a damn good job of faking it.*

In July, in a late-night tweet from the White House, President Trump [threatened](#) Iran, in all caps, with

“CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED.”

Since that rant, Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo seem to be taking pages from the Iraq War playbook. They are cherry-picking intelligence and inflating threats. They're making specious connections between Iran and terrorists, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. And they're ratcheting up their rhetoric.

Trump himself used his speech before the United Nations on September 25 to, as Mitchell Plitnick [noted](#) on this site, “build the case for aggression against Iran and even to add more obstacles to a peaceful resolution of tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic.” These tensions are about to get worse. In early November, the administration will hit countries doing business with Iran with a new round of harsh sanctions. The likelihood that this pressure will explode into military conflict is rising dramatically.

## Counterproductive Strategy

War with Iran would be a painful and pointless disaster. It would make the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan look like warm-up acts. It would cost trillions of dollars, kill tens of thousands of people and destabilize an already volatile region. It would trigger a global recession as oil prices spike and uncertainty collapses markets. It would also drive the spread of nuclear weapons and increase the risk of nuclear weapons use.

War would not in any conceivable scenario lead to the establishment of a popular, democratic, and pro-Western government in Iran. With war would come chaos. If the current regime were to fall, the power would pass not to demonstrators in the streets but to those with the guns—the Revolutionary Guard. In all likelihood, war would bring to power a more virulent, more dictatorial, and more anti-American regime than the current one in Iran.

“The Administration's emphasis on coercion and threats of military action without diplomatic engagement provides no exit ramp to avoid collision,” wrote 53 top national security former officials and experts in an open [statement](#) on September 23 assessing the Trump administration's Iran strategy.

I was proud to join Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Ambassador Carla Hills, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, President of the National Defense University General Robert Gard, and the others in this bipartisan appeal to reverse course before these reckless policies drag us into war.

Our warnings fell on deaf ears. The very next day, September 24, National Security Advisor John Bolton dramatically expanded the mission of U.S. combat forces in Syria, [announcing](#) that they would stay in that war-torn nation “as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias.” This approach risks bringing the 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria into direct conflict with the [estimated](#) 10,000 Revolutionary Guard forces there.

On October 3, Bolton commandeered the White House podium to announce that the administration is cutting diplomatic ties even further. The United States has terminated, he said, the 1955 [Treaty of Amity](#)—a basic diplomatic accord that regulates economic and consular ties between America and Iran—blaming Iran directly for attacks on a now-closed U.S. consulate in Basra, Iraq even though an Iranian consulate was similarly [attacked](#) by an angry crowd. He called Iran a “rogue regime” and “the central banker for international terrorism” and countered reporters’ concerns that the United States was closing paths for diplomatic resolution with the assertion that U.S. actions “were closing doors that shouldn’t be opened.” He also claimed without evidence that “Iran is increasing its nuclear program.”

This is all part of a steady, coordinated drumbeat of anti-Iran activities. It began with the U.S. violation and withdrawal from the successful anti-nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This agreement reduced Iran’s nuclear program to a fraction of its former size, froze it for at least 15 years, and put it under the most intrusive inspection regime ever negotiated. But Bolton saw it as an obstacle to a regime-change strategy. Trump, obsessed with demolishing all that President Barack Obama achieved, was only too happy to raze the agreement.

This created a door that Bolton did want opened. The day Trump abandoned the Iran anti-nuclear accord, Bolton [signaled](#) that “what comes next” would be “a much broader resolution of the malign behavior that we see from Iran.” He quickly established an [Iran Action Group](#) to coordinate activities across agencies. The operation appears modeled on the [White House Iraq Group](#) created by the Bush administration to sell the public on the invasion of Iraq.

It is not clear if Trump actually wants a war, but Bolton and Pompeo certainly seem to. They were crystal clear speaking before an Iran hate group summit sponsored by United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) on September 25 in New York. Bolton [threatened](#), “Let my message today be clear: We are watching, and we will come after you...There will indeed be hell to pay.”

Pompeo piled on, [saying](#):

Has Iran lived together with other nations in peace? Has it been a good neighbor? Has it contributed to the maintenance of international peace and security by fully abiding by the decisions of the Security Council? Let’s take a little walk around the world, and you’ll see the answer is a deafening “no.”

## Iran in Comparison

Iran is guilty of many atrocities. The government oppresses women, fills its jails with political prisoners, and has one of the highest execution rates in the world.

Such behavior is not unique to Iran, however. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Trump's strongest supporters in the region and Jared Kushner's [business partners](#), also oppress their people and have terrible human rights records. One outrageous example is the war the two are waging against Yemen that has led to the death of at least [16,200](#) Yemeni civilians and the starvation of [8.4 million](#). The leaders of these countries also have jails full of [political prisoners](#), impose [sharia law](#) on their people, and much more. Americans would not enjoy living under the rule of either Saudi, UAE or Iranian governments.

American policy should be to change the behavior of these autocratic regimes, not to wage war on them.

Even if one agrees with the president's objectives, the Bolton-Trump-Pompeo strategy won't achieve them. That is why I joined with the other national security leaders in our plea for a more effective policy:

Applying pressure and unilateral sanctions without viable diplomatic options is highly unlikely to produce the desired outcome and could lead to a more dangerous, destructive and enduring regional conflict with Iran. A more balanced strategy that couples pressure with effective diplomacy, coming not just from the U.S. but from around the world, will be necessary to achieve U.S. objectives while showing an Iran without nuclear weapons a way forward to integration into the region.

If reasoned statements won't work, maybe congressional action will. On September 26, eight senators, lead by Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) [introduced](#) legislation to prevent Trump from launching an unconstitutional war with Iran. "The administration's approach to Iran is ripped straight out of the same playbook that launched us into the failed invasion of Iraq, and Congress needs to assert its constitutional authority and halt the march to war," said Udall, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) added:

With the White House and Iran seemingly on a collision course, every effort must be made to avoid war. We should be ratcheting down the rhetoric, opening up channels of communication, and reducing the chance of igniting another armed conflict in a region where the consequences could be catastrophic.

These senators deserve widespread public support. Just like the Kavanaugh nomination, the administration is trying to push through its Iran policy before anyone can stop it. It's urgent to do everything possible to slow down this war wagon.

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*Joe Cirincione is the president of Ploughshares Fund and the author of Nuclear Nightmares: Securing the World Before It Is Too Late.*

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**Michel Chossudovsky**

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