News
Analysis

The sun sets behind the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea June 3. (CNS/Jeff Sherman, U.S. Navy handout via Reuters)

by Margot Patterson

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Tensions between the United States and Iran threatened to erupt into war last month when President Donald Trump was within minutes of authorizing a military strike on Iran after its downing of a U.S. surveillance drone June 20. While Trump

backed off the immediate threat, relations between the U.S. and Iran have become increasingly complex and dangerous, with the administration itself voicing differing strategies.

The take down of the drone, which the United States claimed was in international air space and the Islamic Republic said was in Iran's, was the latest in a series of escalations in the Persian Gulf stemming from the United States leaving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and imposing far-reaching sanctions on Iran that are strangling its economy. A year after the United States' withdrawal, analysts say Iran is taking retaliatory steps to show that the U.S. economic war on the country will not be cost-free and to gain leverage for any new negotiations between it and the Trump administration.

But are new negotiations in the cards? The Trump administration's strategy is far from clear. While the president said he wants to begin new negotiations with Iran, one that will result in a better deal, his national security advisor, John Bolton, and secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, are on record advocating for regime change in Iran.

"Although they carefully avoid saying that these days, the reality is if you look at the policy they have put in place it seems designed to bring down the Iranian government by sheer coercion," said Gary Sick, a member of the National Security Council during the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations. Now executive director of Columbia University's Gulf/2000 Project, Sick said the essence of the policy is to punish Iran.

"This is likely to end in some kind of military confrontation simply because Iran is not going to just sit still and let this happen. Iran is going to have to respond and that gets dangerous very fast," Sick said.

On July 12, the House voted 251-170 to support a bipartisan measure that would require the president to obtain Congressional authorization before using military force against Iran. A similar measure was voted down in the Senate on June 28.

Iran has been under U.S. economic sanctions for years, sanctions which became even more stringent when the Obama administration was pressing Iran to negotiate its nuclear program. The nuclear agreement reached in 2015 was predicated on Iran receiving limited sanctions relief in exchange for limits on its nuclear program. But even after the agreement was signed, many companies continued to be wary of

investing in Iran for fear of running afoul of the U.S. Treasury Department. The Trump administration took the United States out of the agreement in May 2018 and in November reimposed sanctions that include secondary sanctions threatening access to the U.S. market to any foreign company doing business with Iran. In April, the Trump administration cut off waivers to eight countries it had permitted to import crude oil from Iran.

"The Trump administration is trying to prevent Iran from exporting a single barrel of oil, which is something nobody has attempted to do in the past," said Barbara Slavin, a journalist who is the director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, a think tank for international affairs, and the author of *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation.*

U.S. President Donald Trump announces his intent to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement from the White House in Washington May 8, 2018. (CNS/Jonathan Ernst)

A Trump-created crisis

Slavin sees the current crisis as one of Trump's own making in withdrawing from the nuclear deal. It's an assessment widely shared.

"President Trump has deliberately created a more unstable situation," said Vali Nasr, a Mideast scholar who in June left his position as dean of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies to advise Democratic presidential candidates.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a foreign policy think tank known for its hawkish views on Iran, has spent years researching ways to deprive Iran of its energy revenues and promoting these to Congress. Mark Dubowitz, chief executive of the foundation, sees a rationale in the Trump administration's erratic messaging. In remarks published in USA Today, Dubowitz said, "I think it's actually a well-orchestrated campaign that has a public relations piece, a military positioning piece (and) obviously the economic financial piece" of escalating sanctions. Dubowitz described Bolton and Pompeo as "bad cops" intended to make Iran — and the rest of the world — anxious about Trump's intentions. The behavior gives the Trump administration "diplomatic flexibility," he told USA Today.

"There is no doubt that Iran is very aggressive about expanding its influence in the Arab world in ways that are inimical to our interests and inimical to Saudi interest and Emirati interests and Israeli interests," said Thomas Mattair, executive director of the Middle East Policy Council. Putting Iran under really serious economic stress could result in a reduced flow of financial assistance to its proxy militias in the region, which might lead to some realignment of forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Altering Iranian behavior is "a long shot," Mattair said; the Islamic Republic is not a regime inclined to surrender.

Though Trump has said he is seeking a more comprehensive agreement with Iran, one that will address the gamut of its activities in the region as well as its production of ballistic missiles, Mattair questioned how much thought there was behind the offer to restart talks.

"I think they have not got any clear ideas on whether they could renegotiate the agreement, or how they could renegotiate the agreement, or how they could achieve the redeployment of Iranian forces in the region, or how they could succeed in the disarming of Iranian-backed militias," said Mattair.

But is renegotiation the objective? Trump's key foreign policy advisors are militarists who believe Tehran can't be negotiated with and known for advocating the use of military power to advance U.S. interests. If regime change is the objective, who and what would replace the current government? What assurances would there be that the new regime benefits either U.S interests, or the Iranian people, or regional stability?

Sick see parallels to the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003. "There is no thought being given, at least none that we can perceive, to what would happen afterwards," he said. "This is a critical error. We've been round that track before and the idea that everything will just work out because you want it to, by now we should know better than that."

The most likely candidate the White House has in mind for taking over the Iranian government is the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), a group formerly on the U.S. foreign terrorist list that has won friends in Washington. Leftist Islamic revolutionaries who fought to bring down the shah of Iran, the MEK became bitter foes of the Islamic Republic once it came to power, assassinating many of the leaders of the new regime, including, in 1981, its prime minister and president. The group is widely loathed inside Iran for fighting on the side of Iraq in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.

Trita Parsi believes proponents of regime change in the administration don't care about the potentially dire turmoil and chaos that could result from such an event. They view the issue from a very different lens, according to Parsi, author of several books on U.S.-Iran relations and founder and former president of the National Iranian American Council.

Differing agendas within an administration are not uncommon. What is notable is the extent to which other countries are influencing U.S. policy. Paul Pillar, a 28-year

veteran of the CIA who is now a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies, said Trump has sub contracted Middle East policy to a few select states in the region, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It's a policy reflected in the Trump administration soft-pedaling the Saudi murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, continuing to support the Saudi and Emiratis' highly destructive war in Yemen, and doing Israel's bidding on everything to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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> — *Paul Pillar*
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Pillar views Trump's rejection of the Iran nuclear deal as rooted in domestic politics rather than a thought-through foreign policy. For Trump, the nuclear deal was an accomplishment of President Barack Obama, and something to be destroyed for that very reason. Insofar as Trump is following the Israelis' lead, he is angling to score points at home with a strong pro-Israel constituency.

Slavin agrees. "I think Donald Trump's donors in the United States, people like Sheldon Adelson, were very emphatic that they wanted him to destroy the Iran nuclear deal. [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Bibi Netanyahu, Mohammed bin Salman, leader of Saudi Arabia, and Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto leader of the UAE — these are the main constituencies for trashing the nuclear deal and for reimposing sanctions on Iran even though it was in compliance with that deal.

We know he is flattered by the Saudis and the Israelis and the Emiratis. He does business with the Emiratis. He has some Trump properties in the UAE. He sees everything through the lens of his own personal political and economic advantage.

He's no great strategist, particularly not of the Middle East."

Heading toward a collision

That leaves the United States and Iran on a dangerous collision course. With the U.S. government attempting to take down the government of Iran, its banking system, its entire financial system, its ability to produce and export goods, Iran will push back, whether through sabotage to oil tankers in the Persian Gulf or other asymmetrical acts, many of them likely to be aimed not directly at the United States but at other countries which Iran hopes will persuade the United States to end or alter its campaign of "maximum pressure."

How sound that campaign is, how well it serves U.S. interests, as opposed to those of its allies, is an open question. But U.S. antagonism toward Iran can be reflexive as can be Iranian antipathy toward the U.S. If Americans remember the 1979 student takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the 444 days in which 52 U.S. diplomats and embassy staff were held hostage, Iranians remember the 1953 CIA coup that brought down the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and returned Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power.

The hostage crisis left Americans with little good will toward the Islamic Republic. Even today chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" still occur in Tehran. That rhetoric plus resistance to U.S. hegemony in the region keep Iran a persistent irritant to American policymakers and politicians, and Iran's championship of the Palestinian cause and its support for Hamas and Hezbollah have made it anathema to Israel and its backers in the United States. Hostility to Iran has become engrained in American political discourse, which depicts Iran's intentions as irrationally and consistently nefarious. But despite maniacal intentions being attributed to it, few experts believe that if Iran gained a nuclear weapon, it would be suicidal enough to drop it on Israel, which possesses many more. But Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would threaten Israel's monopoly of them in the Middle East and place greater constraints on Israel.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks at a joint news conference in The Hague, Netherlands June 3. (CNS/Reuters/Piroschka Van De Wouw)

According to Slavin, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Israel's new allies in an emerging alliance, have similar ambitions. All three countries want to see Iran weakened, its influence in the region checked, and any possibility of a rapprochement between the United States and Iran quashed.

Those goals are echoed by many in Congress. "There's a lot of money and well-organized lobbying and political bundling and influence, especially right now on the Republican side, for a more hardline policy on Iran and for a more pro-Israel and more pro-Saudi and UAE policy," said Jamal Abdi, the president of the National Iranian American Council and a former advisor to Congress on national security and foreign policy issues.

Most Republicans and some Democrats opposed the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, which became a Republican political litmus test in the 2016 presidential election, with all but two of the candidates running for the Republican presidential nomination

saying the deal wasn't sufficiently tough on Iran. (One of the two candidates was Donald Trump.) What would be sufficiently tough remains to be determined. Meanwhile, in the absence of an agreement, Iran is being forced by U.S. intransigence to pursue nuclear capabilities it had agreed to abandon, if only to gain leverage to respond to the existential threat it now faces from the United States.

Abdi points out that as popular as sanctions are with members of Congress, they have not been productive but have kept Iran in a state of arrested development. External pressures on the regime have curbed the growth of a strong middle class, inhibited natural pressures for greater democracy and human rights, and empowered quasi-government actors that benefit from a sanctions economy.

While legitimate criticisms can be made of Iran, Abdi said political discussions of Iran obscure the key issue between the two nations — the United States' expectation of unchallenged dominance in the Middle East and Iran's compliance with that.

"The real issue that we have with Iran is that we want Iran to be a puppet state," Abdi said. "The U.S. wants to have influence with Iran and to have a similar relation to what we had with the shah of Iran, where we were able to dictate a lot of what they did and sell them a lot of arms."

Trump became president promising no more "stupid wars" in the Middle East. Ironically, he could stumble into a new one, aided and abetted by his bellicose foreign policy team. They are not letting up on threats to Iran. At the Christians United for Israel conference July 8-9, which five senior members of the Trump administration attended, Bolton called the 2015 Iran deal the "worst diplomatic debacle in American history" and promised the evangelicals gathered there continued U.S. pressure on Iran.

Pillar warns that even if neither side consciously opts to go to war, there's a rising risk of escalation, something Bolton would be aware of even if the president is not. Alluding to the predictable if muted criticisms within Republican ranks of the president's decision to cancel the military strike in June, Pillar observed that Trump is going to be under heavy pressure to adopt military measures if there is another drone shot down.

"Even if it did stray into Iranian territory that won't be immediately obvious to the public, especially given the information coming from the administration," he said. "Look at all the criticism he got from the right saying 'You're showing weakness. You

can't say something and then back off.' He is subject to those kinds of charges from within his own party, and I would not count on him being able to resist that kind of pressure in the escalatory direction."

[Margot Patterson is a writer and editor based in Kansas City, Missouri.]