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Trump Trashes Iran Deal to Satisfy Netanyahu

By Gareth Porter
October 20, 2017

President Donald Trump's new Iran policy clearly represents a dangerous rejection of diplomacy in favor of confrontation. But it's more than that: It's a major shift toward a much closer alignment of U.S. policy with that of the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Whether explicitly or not, Trump's vow to work with Congress to renegotiate the Iran nuclear agreement, and his explicit threat to withdraw from the deal if no renegotiation takes place,

appear to be satisfying the hardline demands Netanyahu has made of Washington's policy toward Tehran.

Specifically, Netanyahu has continued to demand that Trump either withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or make far-reaching changes that he knows are impossible to achieve. In his September 17 speech to the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu declared, "Israel's policy toward the nuclear deal with Iran is very simple: Change it or cancel it." And he made no secret of what that meant: If Trump doesn't "cancel" the deal, he must get rid of [1] its "sunset clause" and demand [2] that Iran end its advanced centrifuges and long-range missile program, among other fundamentally unattainable objectives.

Trump's statement last Friday [3] managed to include both of the either/or choices that Netanyahu had given him. He warned that, if Congress and America's European allies do not agree on a plan to revise the deal, "then the agreement will be terminated." He added that the agreement "is under continuous review," and our participation "can be canceled by me, as president at any time."

One provision the administration wants Congress to put into amended legislation would allow sanctions to be imposed if Iran crosses certain "trigger points," which would include not only nuclear issues but the Israeli demand that Iran stop its long-range missile program. Ballistic missiles were never included in the JCPOA negotiations for an obvious reason: Iran has the same right to develop ballistic missiles as any other independent state, and it firmly rejected *pro forma* demands by the Barack Obama administration to include the issue in negotiations.

Trump went a long way towards Netanyahu's "cancel" option by refusing last week to certify that Iran was keeping up its end of the JPCOA. That move signaled his intention to scrap the central compromise on which the entire agreement rests.

Although the Middle East is very different today than during the George W. Bush administration, some parallels can be found in comparing Trump's policy toward the JCPOA and Bush's policy toward Iran during the early phase of its uranium enrichment program.

The key figures who had primary influence on both Trump's and Bush's Iran policies held views close to those of Israel's right-wing Likud Party. The main conduit for the Likudist line in the Trump White House is Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, primary foreign policy advisor, and longtime friend and supporter [4] of Netanyahu. Kushner's parents are also long-time supporters of Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank. [5]

Another figure to whom the Trump White House has turned is John Bolton, undersecretary of state and a key policymaker on Iran in the Bush administration. Although Bolton was not appointed Trump's secretary of state, as he'd hoped, he suddenly reemerged as a player on Iran policy thanks to his relationship with Kushner. *Politico* reports [6] that Bolton met with Kushner a few days before the final policy statement was released and urged a complete withdrawal from the deal in favor of his own plan for containing Iran.

Bolton spoke with Trump by phone on Thursday about the paragraph in the deal that vowed it would be "terminated" if there was any renegotiation, according to *Politico* [6]. He was calling Trump from Las Vegas, where he'd been meeting with casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, the third major figure behind Trump's shift towards Israeli issues. Adelson is a Likud supporter who has long been a close friend of Netanyahu's and has used his Israeli tabloid newspaper *Israel Hayom* to support Netanyahu's campaigns [7]. He was Trump's main campaign contributor [8] in 2016, donating $100 million. Adelson's real interest has been in supporting Israel's interests in Washington [9]—especially with regard to Iran.

In a public appearance in Israel in 2013, when Adelson was asked about his view on negotiating with Tehran, he suggested [10] dropping a nuclear weapon on a desert in Iran and then saying to the Iranians, "See! The next one is in the middle of Tehran. So, we mean business. You want to be wiped out? Go ahead and take a tough position and continue with your nuclear development…."

The Likud Party policy preferences on Iran dominated the Bush administration in large part because of the influence of David Wurmser, a Likudist who was a Middle East advisor first to Bolton and later to Vice President Dick Cheney. Wurmser was a co-author, with Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, of *A Clean Break* [11], the 1996 paper that advised Netanyahu to carry out military strikes against Syria and Iran and to remove the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Wurmser convinced Cheney that the administration should seek a pretext for attacking Iran.

But it was Bolton who worked with Israeli officials to plan a campaign to convince the world that Iran was secretly working on nuclear weapons. His goal was to sell key European nations on a UN Security Council resolution accusing Iran of developing a nuclear program. Bolton explains in his memoirs that the assumption of his strategy was that either the Security Council would strip Iran of its right to have a nuclear program or the United States would take unilateral military action.

In the summer of 2004, a large collection of documents allegedly from a covert Iranian nuclear weapons research program was suddenly obtained by Germany's foreign intelligence agency. Those documents became the sole alleged evidence that such a program existed. But this writer found more than one telltale sign of fraud in the papers [12], and a former senior German foreign office official told me on the record in March 2013 that the source who passed on the documents was a member of the Mujihadeen e-Khalq (MEK), the armed Iranian opposition group. The MEK has allegedly worked with Israel's Mossad [13] for some time.

Neither the Bush administration nor the Trump administration viewed the alleged danger of nuclear proliferation by Iran as the priority problem per se; it was rather an issue to be exploited to weaken the Islamic regime and ultimately achieve regime change. Hilary Mann Leverett, the NSC coordinator in the Persian Gulf from 2001-03, told this writer in a 2013 interview that Wurmser and other Cheney advisors were convinced that the student protests of 1999 indicated that Iranians were ready to overthrow the Islamic Republic. In his statement last week, Trump blamed Obama [3] for having lifted nuclear sanctions on Iran "just before what would have been the total collapse of the Iranian regime."

After Netanyahu became Israeli prime minister in early 2009, his administration worked assiduously for four years to maneuver the Obama administration into giving Iran an ultimatum over its enrichment program. Obama rejected such a proposal, but Bolton has repeated his call for the United States to bomb Iran [14] year after year.

Now the Trump administration is playing out a new chapter in the drama of the Likudists and their patrons in Washington. Their objective is nothing less than using U.S. power to weaken Iran through military means if possible and economic sanctions if necessary. The remarkable thing is that Trump is cooperating even more eagerly than did Bush.