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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

[JOHN BOLTON'S QUEST TO START A WAR WITH IRAN](#)

Iran hawks appear to be getting nervous. As the walls close in around Donald Trump, so too do their opportunities to start a war with Iran.

That anxiety was on display earlier this month when Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton said that the administration has "little doubt" ([sound familiar?](#)) that Iran is committed to developing nuclear weapons. Bolton offered no evidence for that claim, but he seemingly tried to back it up this week [on Twitter](#) by promoting a report from a [hawkish think-tank](#) -- or in other words, not information from the U.S. intelligence committee.

The reason Bolton didn't cite U.S. intelligence or any other credible source of information is [because there is no evidence that Iran is "committed" to developing nuclear weapons](#). In reality, U.S. intelligence and the International Atomic Energy Agency have concluded just the opposite, that Iran has decided against developing nuclear weapons and that its leaders, at least for now, remain committed to the 2015 nuclear deal that prevents Iran from building the bomb.

Meanwhile, it's anyone's guess as to where Trump is on this issue, but he's lying about it too. Also earlier this month, he falsely claimed the Iran deal gives Tehran the legal right to build a nuclear weapon (of course, once again, [the opposite is true](#), the deal expressly forbids Iran from ever developing nuclear weapons). But so what? Trump lies all the time; that's nothing new, no big deal. But Iran expert Paul Pillar [noted](#) this week why it matters. "The danger of Trump's falsehood about the JCPOA," he wrote, "is that the resulting misperception may form **the backdrop for a sales campaign by the current administration to launch an offensive war against Iran.**"

And that brings us back to Bolton and his personal quest to start a war with Iran, which should be particularly worrisome now, considering the following:

- The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) this week that **Bolton asked the Pentagon to draw up options for a military strike on Iranian targets** soon after Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq launched attacks near American facilities in Baghdad and Basra. The request "definitely rattled people," a former senior U.S. administration official said. "People were

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shocked. It was mind-boggling how cavalier they were about hitting Iran.”

- The New York Times [reported](#) this week that “[s]enior Pentagon officials are voicing deepening fears that...**Bolton could precipitate a conflict with Iran** at a time when Mr. Trump is losing leverage in the Middle East by pulling out American troops.”
- A new report from the International Crisis Group concludes that Trump’s Iran policy of “maximum pressure” is not working, an assessment that “[could drive administration efforts to try to provoke Iran to leave the nuclear deal](#), possibly by urging a potential inspections crisis at the IAEA.”
- Bolton recently took it upon himself to **publicly oppose and reverse Trump’s order to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria**, citing the [presence of Iranian forces](#) as a reason to stay.
- **Bolton has dedicated much of his career to launching [another war against Iran](#)**. He [helped push](#) Trump to withdraw from the Iran deal. And just eight months prior to joining Team Trump, Bolton promised a cult-like Iranian exile group formerly on a State Department list of terrorist groups that U.S. Iran policy should be to overthrow the regime and that “before 2019, we here will celebrate in Tehran.”
- **Bolton is an unapologetic proponent of the Iraq war** and as a George W. Bush administration official, he [promoted false claims](#) to make the case for the 2003 invasion.
- Bolton has a history of disregarding opinions he disagrees with and **belittling, degrading, and marginalizing those who hold them**. As the Times [noted](#), Bolton “has largely eliminated the internal policy debates that could air high-level disagreements” and he “does not want to hear opposing views.”
- In addition to marginalizing opposing views, Bolton is beefing up his staff with Iran hawks who agree with him. Just last week, he [hired Richard Goldberg](#) -- a staffer at the [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#) **who has been pushing the hardest of hardlines on Iran for the past decade** -- for the [purpose](#) of “countering Iranian weapons of mass destruction.”

Compounding this problem is that Bolton isn’t alone. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is also an Iran hawk who has previously argued against signing the nuclear deal in favor of air strikes. As Trump’s CIA Director and now top diplomat, Pompeo has spent the past two years laying the groundwork for war with Iran, such as delivering a series of [hawkish anti-Iran speeches](#) and orchestrating a leak of documents intended to ([baselessly](#)) link Iran to al-Qaeda. He too has

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[cavalierly dismissed](#) U.S. intelligence assessments about Iran's nuclear program, and he teamed up with Bolton in New York during last year's UN General Assembly [for a series of Iran bashing sessions](#) with some of the most influential and well-funded anti-Iran groups here in the U.S.

Pompeo's speech in Cairo last week that was ostensibly meant to lay out the administration's wider Middle East policy served largely as [another Iran bashing session](#). And next month, Pompeo plans to host an Iran-focused summit in Poland that even many EU foreign ministers [want nothing to do with](#).

The bottom line is that the evidence is piling up that the Trump administration's Iran policy is increasingly headed in one direction. "All that is needed is some triggering incident," Pillar [added](#), "perhaps an accidental naval encounter in the Persian Gulf or a Shia militia somewhere firing ordnance at a U.S. facility—to make this mélange of nuclear misperception the core of a public case for launching a new war."

CONGRESS NEEDS TO TAKE ACTION

Last month, 40 pro-diplomacy organizations [signed a letter](#) urging lawmakers to speak out in support of the Iran nuclear deal and in favor of returning the U.S. back into compliance with the agreement, to oppose any new sanctions that would undermine the JCPOA, and to object to starting a war of choice with Iran.

Responding to the Journal report that Bolton asked DOD for war plans against Iran, NIAC Action compiled another compelling case that "the U.S. may launch yet another ill-advised war of choice that could haunt the U.S. and Middle East for generations." In order to rein Trump in, NIAC Action [recommends](#) that:

- Congress investigate Bolton's request,
- "[I]mpose political and legal restraints on the administration's ability to start a war with Iran, and
- "[P]ush for a return to compliance with the Iran nuclear deal in order to shore up vital nonproliferation safeguards and restore American diplomatic credibility.

BURIED LEDES

NBD: A new study [found](#) that **ice loss from Antarctica has sextupled since the 1970s**.

That story about **Trump directing his former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress?** [Yeah it's a huge deal](#).

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Oh, and every [now and then](#), **Trump says he wants to pull the U.S. out of NATO.**

Instead of working to re-open the government, Senate Republicans have been **pushing an anti-BDS bill that every expert says would violate Americans' First Amendment rights** to protest the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Foundation for Middle East Peace [has the facts](#).

Meanwhile, a group of House Republicans [are trying to block freshman Rep. Rashida Tlaib from providing Members of Congress with a more balanced view](#) of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

BuzzFeed [says](#) the **Israel issue “will be the great foreign policy debate of the Democratic primary”** and Peter Beinart [thinks](#) Sen. Bernie Sanders would win it.

Who [would have guessed](#) that **Trump's Cuba policy is backfiring as well?**

The Pentagon announced last year that it had ceased providing aerial refueling to Saudi-led coalition warplanes bombing Yemen. “But newly obtained documents [reveal](#) that the United States has also been **training coalition military personnel from the United Arab Emirates for the air war in Yemen.**”

Why is anyone celebrating the fact that women are now [leaders of the military-industrial-complex?](#)

House Democrats [should refrain from messing around with or obstructing the Trump administration's diplomacy](#) with North Korea.

The Pentagon “is [developing a plan to scrutinize prospective recruits with foreign ties, including some U.S. citizens](#), after a related effort targeting thousands of green-card holders was blocked by a federal judge last year.”

Here's a long read on [how the Saudi government is working to silence its critics across the world](#).

And finally, there was big Brexit news from the UK this week, as Parliament overwhelmingly voted against Prime Minister Theresa May's deal to leave the European Union. Still not sure what it's all about? [Try thinking of it as a debate about whether to build a submarine made out of cheese](#).