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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

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SL: Team Trump's 'intelligence' on Iran, debunked

[TRUMP AND BOLTON ARE USING THE IRAQ WAR PLAYBOOK ON IRAN](#)

Donald Trump, John Bolton, and Mike Pompeo would like you to believe that their recent war rhetoric and drastic military escalation in the Middle East are all about responding to, and countering new, threatening activity from Iran. The reality is that, [according to our own intelligence services](#), Iran has actually been responding to the Trump administration's recent aggression.

But here is the key takeaway from the events of the past two weeks: **Donald Trump created the current crisis with Iran.** [Turning challenges into crises](#) is the key feature of his chaos-first foreign policy, and the current situation we find ourselves in now with Iran is no different.

Of course, Trump inherited an Iran policy from President Obama that had Tehran's nuclear program boxed in, taken the U.S. off the path to war, and established enough good will to continue negotiating about other troublesome Iranian policies.

But instead, from day one, Trump's administration has slowly, but deliberately and methodically, worked to dismantle all of it, including working to kill the nuclear agreement and putting us back on the path to war.

We all know that John Bolton is driving this train. His raison d'être is to foment a regime change war in Iran. We know this because he's been writing and talking about it for nearly two decades. We also know that Bolton is "a [seasoned bureaucratic infighter](#) who has the skills to press forcefully for his views," and he has a history of skewing, manipulating, or ignoring intelligence to advance his agenda, which is exactly what's happening right now.

'THREAT' VERSUS REALITY

Seeing that Team Trump has been [following the Iraq war playbook](#) on Iran, it makes sense that the Bolton-Trump-Pompeo military buildup in the Middle East to counter these alleged Iranian threats is also based on fabricated, unsubstantiated, or in this case, overblown intelligence.

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Here's a breakdown of what the Trump administration said about this threat over the past two weeks, and how U.S. officials, lawmakers, our close allies, or (despite some shameful reporting on this matter) the media have contradicted it:

CLAIM: In the White House [statement](#) that started this whole mess back on May 5, Bolton cited “troubling and escalatory indications and warnings” from Iran as the reason the U.S. was sending a carrier and bomber group to the region.

REALITY: The overall threat assessment on Iran from Bolton and the Trump administration has been contradicted and debunked by multiple sources:

- [The Daily Beast](#): “[M]ultiple U.S. intelligence agencies have assessed that Iran’s new, threatening activity—which the administration points to in justifying its military presence in the Persian Gulf—is **in response to the administration’s aggressive steps over the last two months.**”
- [The New York Times](#): “... other officials — including Europeans, Iraqis, members of both parties in Congress and some senior officials within the Trump administration — said **Iran’s moves might mostly be defensive against what Tehran believes are provocative acts by Washington.**”
- [The Daily Beast](#): “[M]ultiple sources close to the situation told The Daily Beast that **the administration blew [the intelligence on Iran] out of proportion**, characterizing the threat as more significant than it actually was.”
- [The Guardian](#): “The top British general in the US-led coalition against Isis has **said there is no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq or Syria**, directly contradicting US assertions used to justify a military buildup in the region.”
- House Armed Services Chair [Rep. Adam Smith](#): “**I don't see the evidence** that there's actually been an increase in that threat environment.”

CLAIM: Shortly after Bolton’s statement, the administration began citing intel that Iran was moving missiles on small boats as justification for the increased U.S. military presence.

REALITY: Iran moving missiles on boats is not a new or recent development.

- [The New York Times](#): “As military officials struggled to show that the threat from Iran was growing, intelligence officials declassified a photograph of one of the small boats, called dhows, carrying what was described as a functional Iranian missile. ... On its own, two American officials said, **the photograph was not compelling enough to**

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convince the American public and lawmakers, or foreign allies, of the new Iranian threat.”

- [NBC News](#): “**The U.S. has accused Iran of moving missiles and missile components through the region’s waterways for years**, shipping missiles to the Houthis in Yemen and others.”

CLAIM: Scrambling for anything to justify the military build-up, the Trump administration began feeding a line about how it obtained intercepts of Iranians talking about attacking Americans.

REALITY: These claims are, again, either overblown or were in response to Trump administration aggression.

- [The New York Times](#): “[T]he United States recently learned of conversations between the Revolutionary Guards and foreign militias discussing attacks on American troops and diplomats in Iraq. **The conversations themselves are nothing new**, but the recent discussions were held with unusual frequency and included specifics about strikes on American targets. ... Iran began mobilizing its forces after Washington issued new economic sanctions against the country, moved to [stop nations from buying Iranian oil](#) and [designated the Revolutionary Guards, an arm of the Iranian military, a terrorist group](#), two American officials said.”

CLAIM: Trump administration officials blamed Iran for recent small attacks on Saudi Arabian and UAE oil tankers in the region, perhaps providing justification to trigger Bolton’s incredibly broad criteria for a U.S. military response.

REALITY: The Trump administration has currently offered no evidence of this claim.

- [The New York Times](#): “American officials said they have also collected intelligence about Iran targeting commercial shipping, prompting a warning to mariners issued last Friday. That was one of the reasons that led American officials to suspect Iran was behind this week’s sabotage of four tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. **The officials said they do not have conclusive forensic analysis that shows Iran was to blame.**”

CLAIM: Citing these alleged Iranian threats, the Trump administration hastily announced the partial evacuation of non-essential staff at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

REALITY: Again, this order was an overreaction.

- [The New York Times](#): “Working off the new intelligence, the State Department on Wednesday ordered a partial evacuation of the United States Embassy in Baghdad and

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a consulate in Iraqi Kurdistan, **a move that one senior American official said was an overreaction to the intelligence and could possibly do more to endanger diplomats than to keep them safe.**”

MEDIA FAILURES

The media’s handling of the Trump-Bolton-Pompeo Iran aggression has been mixed. On the one hand, some reporters and news outlets have been sufficiently skeptical, reaching out to and reporting from sources who have seen the intelligence and have concluded that it has been blown way out of proportion.

On the other hand, there has been another category of **reporting that is reminiscent of the weeks and months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq**, when credulous reporters would simply repeat Bush administration claims about Iraq’s alleged (and non-existent) WMD programs or links to al-Qaeda, giving them the aura of fact. Unfortunately this kind of thing [is happening again](#), in addition to reporting that leaves out key contextual details. For example:

- A Wall Street Journal story [reported](#) on anonymous Trump administration claims about Iran being to blame for attacks on the Saudi and UAE oil tankers. But the body of the story contained a number of caveats -- including this line in paragraph 14: “Exactly what happened to the tankers was difficult to ascertain” -- suggesting that there was yet any evidence to prove these claims. Moreover, reporters [should refuse to grant anonymity to officials passing along purported intelligence that can be used to justify going to war](#).
- The popular New York Times podcast “The Daily” focused an entire episode on “John Bolton’s Plan for Iran” **and never once mentioned that he has made a career out of calling for war with Iran**. The podcast also [omitted key details](#), like the success of the Iran nuclear deal and falsely claimed that Iran is violating it.

HOW WE CAN PUSH BACK

We can urge members of Congress to speak out against Trump and Bolton’s march to war. But also, both the House and the Senate have introduced legislation to bar funding for an unauthorized war with Iran: The Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act ([S. 1039/H.R. 2354](#)). Members of Congress need to hear from the public and editorial pages that now is the time to advance this vital legislation.

You can also sign our [petition](#) opposing Bolton’s Iran war. Our friends at NIAC Action are running a [national campaign](#) calling on Congress to block Trump’s war path. And both [MoveOn](#) and [Daily Kos](#) have petitions to stop war with Iran.

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BURIED LEDES

Carbon dioxide levels are now at the highest they've ever been, “[n]ot just in recorded history, not just since the invention of agriculture 10,000 years ago. Since before modern humans existed millions of years ago. [We don't know a planet like this.](#)”

(Oh and [by the way](#), Koalas will likely be extinct soon because of climate change.)

[Meanwhile](#), seawater is infiltrating a nuclear waste dump on a remote Pacific atoll.

[This is](#) how big lobby firms profit from war.

A new [poll](#) found that “the vast majority of Democrats (72 percent) **believe the US should re-enter the JCPOA nuclear agreement**, including 45 percent who strongly support doing so.”

The Trump administration won't join an effort led by New Zealand and France after the Christchurch attack [to encourage](#) tech companies and countries to work together to end the use of social media in acts of terrorism.

What does [Winning Without War](#) mean?

One of the most [underreported stories](#) of foreign intervention in the 2016 election is **the role played by Israel and other Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.**

An Arab writer and activist [explains](#) why **he is the target of threats from Saudi Arabia.**

“It's hard for women to be hired, promoted or taken seriously in [the national security establishment.](#)”

Are you there, McMaster? [It's me, the American people.](#)

And finally, after being [called out](#) for grifting on our Forever War, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies [responded](#) by **urging us to continue our Forever War.**