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## Trump at the Crossroads

By Justin Raimondo  
February 7, 2017

Less than three weeks into the presidency of Donald J. Trump, there are several troubling signs that the new administration is abandoning its foreign policy mandate and going off the rails.

First and foremost is the saber-rattling aimed at Iran. The ostensible reason for this is Tehran's testing of mid-range ballistic missiles which, we are told, are "nuclear capable." But of course any and all ballistic missile systems can be modified to carry nuclear warheads, and since Iran is complying with the JCPOA agreed to by Tehran and the Western powers, this is just rhetorical noise generated for home consumption. Accusations by the Trump administration that the tests violate a UN resolution are inaccurate: part of the Iran deal was a revision of an earlier UN resolution that forbade such tests to read that the international body merely "calls on" the Iranians to refrain from such activities. The Obama administration opposed this, but received no backing from our European "allies." So the tests are "legal," albeit considered provocative.

And yet, as Kelsey Davenport and Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association point out: "Given the tensions between Tehran and its neighbors, it is extremely unlikely that Iran will stop developing its ballistic missile capabilities when countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel field ballistic missiles capable of targeting Iran." Indeed, the Saudis have been procuring nuclear capable ballistic missiles from China since the 1980s, more recently with CIA approval. And US arms sales to the Saudis have buttressed their military, enabling the Kingdom's invasion of Yemen – the first such action in the region since Saddam Hussein marched into Kuwait in the

early 1990s. All this gives heft to Tehran's contention that their missile tests are strictly defensive.

The real epicenter of the gathering storm is Yemen, where the Saudis have intervened in the ongoing civil war at the "invitation" of a "President" with no popular support (and whose "election" was engineered in a contest with only one candidate). The insurgent Houthis – northern-based adherents of a dissident sect of Shia Islam – have taken over most of the country, except those areas in the southeast controlled by a resurgent al-Qaeda. It is a conflict grounded in local issues, but the Saudis and our own War Party have internationalized it to such an extent that all mentions of the Houthis in Western media are preceded by the phrase "Iranian-backed" – although no evidence is ever presented to support this claim. In fact, such weapons as the Houthis possess were looted from Yemeni government warehouses when the regime was toppled and large sections of the military went over to the rebels. The reality is that the Houthis are theologically opposed to their Iranian Shi'ite counterparts, an important point that Western journalists routinely overlook, due perhaps to their ignorance of – and contempt for – religion in general.

As the Saudis bombed civilian targets – in one incident targeting a funeral, 140 people were killed – the Obama administration, which had been aiding Riyadh with arms and intelligence, began to pull away from the conflict – but it was too late. In October, Houthi missiles reportedly targeted US ships at the mouth of the Red Sea, and now American officials are claiming that a suicide attack on a Saudi ship was actually meant to target a US ship – a dubious claim, to be sure. This has now morphed into accusations by the Trump administration that the Iranians are targeting US ships in the region.

The US was dragged into the Yemen war by the Obama administration in 2015, and started playing an active role – rather than just passively aiding the Saudis' murderous assault – when we took out mobile Houthi radar installations in retaliation for the October incidents. This is the context of the Trump administration's fulminations, with Trump's national security advisor Mike Flynn putting Iran "on notice" that the US is not going to "sit idly by." This was followed by the imposition of more sanctions on Iran, and the arrival of the USS *Cole* to the area, with more on the way. Signaling trouble on the horizon, Trump tweeted on Friday: "Iran is playing with fire – they don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them. Not me!"

The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, answered Trump in a speech to Iranian military officials this [Tuesday] morning:

*"The new U.S. president says Iran should thank Obama! Why?! Should we thank him for [creating] ISIS, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Syria, or the blatant support for the 2009 sedition in Iran?"*

Mike Flynn's ears must have burned when he got wind of this, for the Ayatollah's accusation that Obama "created ISIS" echo his own contention that the previous administration pursued a policy deliberately aiding and succoring the forces that eventually were consolidated in the Islamic State. In an interview with al-Jazeera, Flynn said:

*“Al-Jazeera: You are basically saying that even in government at the time you knew these groups were around, you saw this analysis, and you were arguing against it, but who wasn’t listening?”*

*Flynn: I think the administration.*

*Al-Jazeera: So the administration turned a blind eye to your analysis?*

*Flynn: I don’t know that they turned a blind eye, I think it was a decision. I think it was a willful decision.*

*Al-Jazeera: A willful decision to support an insurgency that had Salafists, Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood?*

*Flynn: It was a willful decision to do what they’re doing.”*

This underscores the big contradiction at the core of the administration’s anti-Iranian fixation. They denounce Iran as the “number one” supporter of “terrorism,” but the reality is that the Iranians are fighting – and dying – in Syria in battle against ISIS. This includes Tehran’s regional proxy, Hezbollah. And in Yemen, it is the Houthis, not the Saudis, who are the only force either capable of or interested in taking on al-Qaeda.

The truth is that Moscow and Tehran have been doing the heavy lifting in the battle against the terrorist groups Trump vows to “eradicate.”

Trump’s often-stated desire for a rapprochement with Moscow is the key to blasting open the logjam that has made progress toward peace in the Middle East a distant dream. Just as the Russians served as mediators between Washington and Bashar al-Assad in getting chemical weapons out of Syria, so Putin could play the same role in de-escalating the developing US-Iranian conflict. A “grand bargain” with Putin need not focus exclusively on Syria and the NATO buildup on Russia’s borders: such a deal would logically lead to the calming of tensions with Iran.

This possibility is less likely, however, if the more aggressive factions within the Trump administration have their way – and these elements will be strengthened and emboldened if Elliott Abrams is appointed Deputy Secretary of State, as rumored.

Abrams is a hardcore neoconservative with a long record as a rabid warmonger – as well as a vicious anti-Trumper, who attacked candidate Trump as lacking character and disdained him for his “complete ignorance” of foreign policy. Although he is not the only prospective appointee – longtime State Department official Paula Dobriansky, who has served under five presidents, is also reportedly in the running – Abrams is being heavily promoted in the media, and is said to be favored by newly-confirmed Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

His appointment would turn the State Department into a neocon redoubt and signal that the Trump administration could very well be on its way to betraying candidate Trump’s pledge to

seek out “new voices” in the foreign policy realm. Abrams, whose career started in the 1970s as an aide to Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson (D-Boeing), is the voice of the same neoconservative sect that drove the Bush administration to rampage across the Middle East and bring about the biggest military-diplomatic disaster in our recent history.

As I have said before, Trump’s version of American nationalism is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, there is the “isolationist” “America first” aspect, which led him to condemn the Iraq war, question the utility of NATO, and criticize the liberal internationalist interventionism of the Obama administration in Syria and Libya. On the other hand, Trumpian nationalism has a fiercely belligerent aspect, often described as “Jacksonian,” which views any attempt to reach out to old enemies as “appeasement” and too often derides diplomacy as evidence of “weakness.”

As the Trump era commences, there are disturbing signs that the belligerent aspect is trumping – if you’ll pardon the expression – the “isolationist” side of the equation. Yet this is by no means certain: the situation is still in flux, as the factions within the administration position themselves for the inevitable struggle.

Our relationship with Russia is the key to untying the Gordian knot that locks our interventionist foreign policy in place. The efforts by the Democrats and their Republican collaborators in Congress to block any attempts at a “grand bargain,” combined with the neoconservatives’ infiltration of the national security bureaucracy, could throw a roadblock on the path to peace. Our only hope is that the President’s focus on domestic affairs will make him wary of getting bogged down in a foreign policy crisis this early in his administration – and remind him of his pre-election promise:

*“Unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength. Although not in government service, I was totally against the war in Iraq, very proudly, saying for many years that it would destabilize the Middle East. Sadly, I was correct...”*

*“My goal is to establish a foreign policy that will endure for several generations. That’s why I also look and have to look for talented experts with approaches and practical ideas, rather than surrounding myself with those who have perfect résumés but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war. We have to look to new people.”*

That’s right, Mr. President, *new people* – not Elliott Abrams.