

John Bolton and Washington's Iran policy industry

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In a social media post late on March 22, Trump announced that Bolton will replace Lieutenant General HR McMaster as his chief adviser on national security beginning on April 9 [Reuters]

With the appointment of John Bolton as the next US national security adviser, a new hawkish voice advocating greater confrontation with US rivals, such as North Korea and Iran, has entered the centre of foreign policy discussions in the Trump administration. Mr Bolton has long been one of Washington's staunchest critics of the Islamic Republic, not only wishing the Iran nuclear deal to cease entirely but to be replaced with a conscious policy of regime change.

Mr Bolton, however, is only a by-product of a general policy environment in Washington continually primed to directly confront Iran. Such a policy may not regularly appear overt, but it always seems to lie in waiting. As many will correctly worry that Mr Bolton's appointment raises the likelihood of war with another Middle Eastern country, of equal concern should be his ability to draw

upon a robust think-tank, policy and lobbying complex heavily populated with ideas advocating opposition to Iran, designating it as the premier security threat to a stable Middle East, and well-disposed to grease the wheels of confrontation.

Washington is not a place that has taken kindly to Iran. For nearly four decades, the US government has undertaken an array of policies to, directly and indirectly, stem the country's influence, regional activity, and power. A steady stream of criticisms and sabre-rattling mantras have served as reminders that opposition to Iran is one of the great mainstays of US foreign policy. Among the greatest hits of this vast back catalogue are President Bush's "Axis of Evil," Sen. McCain's "bomb, bomb, bomb Iran," President Obama's "all options are on the table," and former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn's putting Iran "on notice". These might be the closest, albeit more politically tactful, equivalents to the "Death to America" chants emanating now and again from Iran.

Why Trump's new white house appointments are raising concerns

Advocacy groups exist to pressure policymakers to push for "democratic change" in Iran by championing the role of Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a former US Department of State terrorist designee that has feted a bipartisan collection of officials, paid them hefty speaking fees, and sold them fantastical visions of regime change. Institutes maintain programs designed to track and analyse "those policies and actions of the Iranian state and its various arms that negatively impact Iran's neighbours and the broader international community". Think-tanks peg Iran as a major target of their "critical threats" projects. Policy briefs favouring a policy to confront, oppose and stymie Iran emerge at a rapid pace as do conferences branding Iran a major sponsor of violent extremism. Polling questions meant to gauge American opinions for the Iran nuclear deal are manipulated to demonstrate widespread belief the deal should be renegotiated. The newly appointed secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, declassified documents as CIA director in the hopes of drawing a closer link between Iran and al-Qaeda. Add to these homegrown efforts groups like AIPAC and SAPRAC, who lobby for a tougher Iran policy in support of Israeli and Saudi interests, and the funding of think-tanks by Iran's Gulf rivals. Altogether one has all the makings of a robust cottage industry spanning institutions and the political spectrum built around confronting Iran, which the media often shows little desire for combating.

Making matters worse, the need to oppose the Iranian threat is often framed by doubling-down on the region's ethnonational and sectarian faultlines. The favoured think-tank speak of supporting "Arab Partners" against Iran, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's befuddling statement that Iraqi Shia militias are necessarily beholden to Iranian interests, and the Trump administration's Iran fact-sheet questioning "the immediate threat of Sunni extremist organisations over the longer-term threat of Iranian-backed militancy," all contribute to the hazardous promotion of an Arab versus Iran, Sunni versus Shia framework with Iran as the pre-eminent threat.

Any of these statements, programs, or activities alone may not present a danger in itself, nor should they be discarded out of hand for their role in monitoring Iranian activity. But their contribution to an overwhelming chorus proclaiming a singular belief and uniform policy conclusion - that Iran is the major regional force of destabilisation and must be confronted forcefully - should concern anyone unprepared for a new round of conflict in the Middle East.

Sceptics may wish to dismiss the likelihood of the US engaging another Middle Eastern country in direct conflict, especially at the potential urging of a complicated ally like Saudi Arabia, because of the way the US stumbled into war with Iraq. But Iraq was simply not in the limelight of US political discourse or perceived as a major security threat then as Iran is today. Hence the need in the lead-up to the Iraq War to manufacture both intelligence and consent in order to justify intervention; in the case of Iran, consent is already in place.

Iran is not blameless in contributing to unstable environments across the Middle East and is significantly culpable for events in Syria, dramatically less so in Yemen, and somewhere in between in Iraq. Yet regardless of the variation in these circumstances, the think-tank, policy, and lobbying complex in Washington has long placed Iran at the centre of any discussion regarding destabilising activity across the entirety of the region, often at the expense of faithfully accounting for other destabilising actors and factors, whether local or global.

If armed confrontation with Iran becomes a real possibility on account of the appointment of Mr Bolton to national security adviser, will the robust, anti-Iran industry in Washington be able to offer any alternative vision, or simply look to actualise and validate what it has long believed? Unfortunately, there is no dissent channel in Washington when it comes to Iran policy and with the elevation

of one of the most hawkish voices on Iran to the position of national security adviser, it may be needed more desperately than ever.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kevin Schwartz

Kevin Schwartz is a research fellow at the Library of Congress.

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