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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

TEAM TRUMP BOOSTS EFFORTS TO PROMOTE DUBIOUS LINK BETWEEN IRAN AND AL QAEDA

We've been [warning for almost two years](#) now that the Trump administration is [putting the United States on a path to war with Iran](#), particularly after Trump [named John Bolton](#) as his National Security Advisor. Withdrawing from the Iran deal has always been the centerpiece of this campaign, with top officials accompanying it with [bellicose rhetoric](#) seemingly meant to lay the groundwork for war. Until now, their case has largely been a political one. But this week, the Washington Times [reported](#) that the Trump administration is exploring a legal case by increasingly focusing on linking Iran to al Qaeda, thus providing an opening to use the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to justify war with Iran.

The Trump administration has appeared to flirt [with this idea before](#), and it actually began making Iran-al Qaeda links back in late 2017, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, then-CIA Director, [laundered a document dump](#) from the Osama bin Laden raid purporting to show an Iran-al Qaeda connection through the Foundation of Defense of Democracies -- which itself has been pushing for war and regime change in Iran for years.

However, there are two big problems with this particular argument: Iran's relationship with al Qaeda is not what the Trump administration is making it out to be, and simply put, the 2001 AUMF just does not apply to Iran at all. Consider the following facts:

- A 2012 [report](#) by the Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy at West Point found that the relationship between al Qaeda, a Sunni terrorist group, and Iran, led by Shiite clerics, is **“not one of alliance” but “highly antagonistic”** and “largely based on indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of detained jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Laden's family.”
- A [study](#) last year by New America came to a similar conclusion; **it found “no evidence of cooperation ... on planning or carrying out terrorist attacks”** between Iran and al-Qaeda and that any cooperation or relationship was one of either [expediency or calculation](#).

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- Other experts [have said](#) they've "**never seen any evidence of an active collaboration**" and have dismissed the connection as an "oversimplification of the facts" and that any relationship between Iran and al Qaeda has [largely](#) been "an on-again, off-again marriage of convenience pockmarked by bouts of bitter acrimony."

Sen. Angus King is quoted in the Times [piece](#) dismissing the idea that the 2001 AUMF could be used as legal authority to attack Iran. And as Steve Vladeck and Tess Bridgeman of Just Security [note](#), "it's questionable whether the 2001 AUMF would apply to a country harboring AQ *today*, as opposed to a country that "harbored" (past tense) those groups on or before 9/11, the clear intent of the statutory authorization." Indeed, they add, "the fact that we're even having this conversation is yet further proof, alongside years of previous examples, of the desperate need for Congress to revisit the 2001 AUMF." Rep. Barbara Lee [just so happens to be doing exactly that](#).

But regarding the Trump administration's quest to link Iran to al Qaeda, Paul Pillar, a non-resident fellow at Georgetown and Brookings who spent nearly three decades in the U.S. intelligence community, [previously noted that we've seen this movie before](#):

This entire effort to manipulate public perceptions has been remarkably similar to the efforts by promoters of the Iraq War to use whatever scraps they could find to suggest that there was, in George W. Bush's words, an "alliance" between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda that in fact never existed.

But [adding up all the evidence](#) pointing toward war with Iran combined with a new effort to establish a (however erroneous) legal justification, the outlook looks grim, particularly seeing that the Iran regime change industry may begin to double its efforts now that [time may be running out](#) to take advantage of Donald Trump to achieve their aims.

THE PRO-DIPLOMACY MOVEMENT STRIKES BACK

The forces that support the Iran nuclear deal and wider diplomacy efforts aren't backing down and are becoming more vocal.

More than fifty pro-diplomacy groups have signed on to a [statement](#) affirming their support for the JCPOA, calling on the U.S. to return to compliance, and opposing any efforts to further derail its successes and offensive military action against Iran.

And these efforts are starting to gain momentum. Just [last weekend](#), the Democratic National Committee passed a [resolution](#) calling on the U.S. to return to the deal, [signaling](#) that the 2020 presidential candidates will likely run on this issue.

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What's more, a [poll out this week](#) found that a whopping 80 percent of Americans prefer diplomacy to keep Iran a non-nuclear weapons state. The survey also found that even if Iran decides to start a nuclear weapons program, of which it currently does not have, "there was a bipartisan preference for diplomacy over military action."

Meanwhile Vice President Pence [was in Europe this week](#) ([embarrassingly](#)) trying to get the Europeans themselves to withdraw from the Iran deal, a request that was met with a fairly sizable "[no thanks](#)," with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and EU foreign policy chief Frederica Mogherini delivering powerful speeches supporting the JCPOA.

Referring to Pence's request, Carl Bildt, the former Prime Minister of Sweden, [concluded](#) that "the only rational explanation for such a policy is that it seeks to create an excuse for a direct and open confrontation with Iran."

BURIED LEDES

There are a handful of Democrats in Congress [attacking progressives](#) for not backing Trump and for urging a [cautious approach](#) to the crisis in Venezuela, which is weird in part because, according to a new book by former FBI Director Andrew McCabe, Trump [once said](#) **we should be going to war with Venezuela because they have all the oil.**

On the eve of Trump's upcoming Summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, nearly 50 pro-diplomacy groups signed on to a [statement of principles](#) **supporting an end to the Korean war, opposing unprovoked war, and urging reciprocal action on denuclearization.**

As Democratic Party elites are becoming [increasingly out of touch](#) with the rank-and-file on key foreign policy issues, presidential candidates can [no longer ignore](#) that **the base of the party has shifted to the left on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.**

Trump will reportedly keep 200 U.S. troops in Syria apparently for a [dubious peacekeeping mission](#), and as a [reminder](#), **he has no legal authority to do so.**

The negative effects from climate change are worsening by the day with no real end in sight and Donald Trump just hired a guy to run a panel on the issue who [once said](#) "the demonization of carbon dioxide is just like the demonization of the poor Jews under Hitler."

House Democrats are [planning to investigate](#) a plan pushed by top White House officials, including then-National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, **to export nuclear technology to**

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Saudi Arabia. Several members of the National Security Council at the time raised concerns about the ethics and legality of such a proposal.

In a new [report](#), the Southern Poverty Law Center found **a significant rise in the number of hate groups in the last four years**, with a 7 percent increase in 2018 alone. “[White nationalist](#) groups alone surged by nearly 50 percent last year, growing from 100 chapters in 2017 to 148 in 2018.”

[THE REAL SWAMP](#): “[T]hose experts you regularly read or see on screen, whose scholarship and advice Washington’s politicians and other officials often use, are in some cases being paid, directly or indirectly, by the very countries on which they are offering advice and analysis. And here’s the catch: **they can do so without ever having to tell you about it.**”

And finally, prior to a trip to the United States during prohibition, Winston Churchill obtained [a doctor’s note](#) **granting him the authority to consume “naturally indefinite” amounts of alcohol** while hobnobbing with his American counterparts.