

The Racket of National Security

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. U.S national security has turned into a racket. Enemies and bogeymen are invented with monotonous regularity to justify massive military budgets and kickbacks to insiders. But with so much turmoil at home, how long can this swindle go on? Gareth, wonderful to have you here on Renegade Inc.

Gareth Porter Well, thanks so much for having me. Great to be here.

Ross We are in the middle of, if you like, one of the great pandemics. The Corona virus has brought the world to a shuddering halt and our audience are perplexed. One of the constants before the virus, during the virus and I'm sure after, has been a constant spoiling for a fight - America and Iran. Why are we in this situation? Our audience want to know why the political class in the US are constantly badgering Iran for a war.

Gareth Porter Well, you've asked a very complex question, and it's going to be difficult to answer it in a very simple way. But, you know, I have delved into the history of U.S. - Iran policy, and that has a very long history going back to the middle stages of the Cold War. And for four decades, I think the United States essentially had a grudge against Iran because of the fact that we'd lost our client regime - the Shah's regime - in 1979, and really longed to have it back, but couldn't do that. And that was the beginning of, I think, this grudge. But then after the Cold War ended, we have a new stage, which I've discussed in my book, *Manufactured Crisis*, that where the U.S. national security state really needed Iran as an adversary in order to partially, at least, tried to make up for the loss of the Soviet Union as its primary adversary and primary excuse for the Cold War, for that Cold War level of spending on the military and intelligence. So that was a second phase. But then, you know, I think we quickly go into a third phase where the role of Israel as an influence on U.S. policy toward Iran became really very central. It began really under Bill Clinton and it has continued under Bush and less so under Obama, but then under Trump, very much so. And so to sort of shorten the story and go directly to the Trump administration, I think that the real principal cause of this apparent desire for war with Iran is the pressure from the constant badgering from the Netanyahu government in Israel and its ability to essentially leverage a strong influence on U.S. policy through particularly the secretary of state that we now have, Pompeo. And we've seen over the last year, in particular, this influence by Pompeo on the policy has been extremely strong and it has resulted - that is the policy influence - has resulted in president Trump himself being manoeuvred into a position where he almost went to war twice. And the result was that we didn't go to war. And I would argue that there are two reasons for this: One, trump himself does not want to have any part of a war with Iran. But secondly, I can tell you very confidently that the U.S. Pentagon, despite its warlike qualities, does not want to go to war with Iran. It has not wanted to go to war with Iran at all for many years. And the reason is that the United States military, particularly the US Navy, has too much to lose in a war with Iran and nothing to gain.

Ross Why is Benjamin Netanyahu such a provocateur in this game?

Gareth Porter Well, again, that's a longer story. That goes back to the 1990s for sure when Iran first began to have a nuclear programme that was getting a lot of attention and he was

determined to make sure that Iran would not have any nuclear programme because to him it was a signal of potential great power being wielded by Iran in the region. And under Netanyahu, particularly, we've had a situation where Israel felt that it had the power wielded by influencing the United States policy to prevent Iran from having a nuclear programme and from, particularly, having any missile programme that would deliver nuclear weapons. And of course, the Israelis were convinced that Iran was going to get a nuclear weapon. They refused to believe the truth, which was that Iran was not interested in nuclear weapons. So Israel has been determined to prevent Iran from continuing to have a nuclear programme at all by putting pressure on the United States. And it's been very effective in that regard.

Ross Does Donald Trump owe any political favours to anyone since his 2016 victory, which basically means that he's in some way compromised and has to look as though he's squaring up to Iran? In short, cui bono, who does all this benefit?

Gareth Porter The answer is yes. He does feel that he is obliged to do something to satisfy Netanyahu's policy or policy interests by waging a Cold War, at the very least, against Iran by carrying out what has been a regime change policy. In effect, he was put under pressure, obviously, by the Israelis to carry out a policy of maximum pressure against Iran which meant, essentially, eliminating Iran's customers for its oil which has been the mainstay of the Iranian budget forever. So he has done that at the behest of the Israelis. But the Israelis have also, Netanyahu has wanted to, if at all possible, have a military confrontation with Iran and that it is done again through Mike Pompeo. Through Pompeo he has manoeuvred into a couple of major crises with Iran. And we've fortunately escaped the war because Trump said no.

Ross And when it comes down to the who benefits question, when we look at the Middle East, who are the other actors in that region who benefit from this consistent, bellicose policy towards the Iranian people?

Gareth Porter Well, of course, the major one is Saudi Arabia. And the prince, who is really the autocrat who runs Saudi Arabia, known as MBS, he basically has been the major benefactor within the region of this policy which the United States has pursued. Both Saudi Arabia and Israel were very upset with Obama because he would not push the all out hostility toward Iran that they wanted. But now they do have that and that's been a huge change, a shift in the regional politics, because that has meant that the Saudis have been engaged in a policy that they would not follow otherwise of a war in Yemen, which, to be honest, started under Obama. Obama gave the signal to the Saudis to go ahead and do that. And it has, of course, meant that the Israelis have been able to pursue a war in Syria using air power very freely against targets, both Iranian and Hezbollah targets, as well as some Syrian targets in Syria. And that has also been a policy that has risked a military confrontation between Israel and Iran, which the Israelis under Netanyahu seem to be very eager to have.

Ross You mentioned earlier that the US Navy, specifically, has too much to lose. We spoke recently to Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson. And his view as a former military man was very, very clear - Iran will not be another Iraq. Be careful what you do. This is a hornet's nest and you will never, ever end this war. Do you think the Pentagon are aware of that when it comes to gaming a lot of these war scenarios and they are realising that the American people don't want this - another bit of foreign adventurism?

Gareth Porter Absolutely. The Pentagon is well aware that they face a very big challenge in any war that might start with Iran. And I think they became acutely aware of it last year when a couple of incidents revealed just how more advanced Iran's military capabilities have become than the Pentagon had been aware of. The first one was when the Iranians shot down a U.S. drone high above the Strait of Hormuz, which the Pentagon was not aware that the Iranians had the capability to do. And so the Pentagon was taken totally by surprise. The second one was, of course, the famous attack which the Houthi's claimed credit for on the Saudi oil facility, which came as a big surprise. And it shouldn't have because it had been made public that the Houthi's had this cruise missile, drone-cruise missile, which had a range of fifteen hundred kilometres. That meant, to the Pentagon, that the Iranians have the ability to hit any U.S. target, either on the sea or on land in the Middle East, essentially.

Ross And the assassination of the Iranian general Soleimani. Was that, let's say, a show of force from Donald Trump to try and persuade the dogs of war within his own advisory circles that he wasn't a lame duck and he could act when he wanted to?

Gareth Porter Well, that, of course, is one of the times when we have Pompeo himself manoeuvring Trump into this situation by deceiving Trump into believing that pro Iranian militias had, in fact, attacked a U.S. base or a base where the U.S. had its own military personnel in Iraq, whereas in fact, it appears that the Iraqi commander or the Iraqi intelligence person on that base discovered that it was, in fact, an ISIS unit in the region that did it. But, of course, Trump was not told that. And he was manoeuvred into a situation where, you know, he carried out that previously pledged freedom to go ahead and take out Soleimani in a situation where he shouldn't have done that at all. And the Iranians then retaliated, but did so in a way that did not kill any U.S. personnel at a base of avoiding pressure on Trump to carry out a war. At that point, that would have been the closest we came to war. I think the Iranians made their point that they have a very strong deterrent. They have the ability to kill U.S. personnel in large numbers in retaliation against a U.S. attack.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we go back to the US to talk with the investigative historian and journalist, Gareth Porter, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. Danny Haiphong: 'If you believe John Bolton is your friend because he is opposed to Trump now, then you're truly deranged. Bolton wrote a book wishing Trump would go to war more with Venezuela, Iran and China. Think about that. Real resistance doesn't engage with war criminals'. Next from George Szamuely: 'Very important to realise that the US no longer even pretends that its sanctions are targeted at adversary regimes. U.S. sanctions are explicitly targeted at civilians. Their goal is to cause as much human misery as possible'. Next from MEHR news agency: 'Iran appears to have dispatched another merchant ship to Venezuela despite Washington's threats against both nations, according to reports'. Finally, we have a tweet from The Onion: 'Bolton pledges to donate all proceeds from book towards killing Iranians and when satire sites get to the truth in a more elegant way than corporate news you know you're in trouble'.

Ross Sharmine Narwani, you're a rare thing, really - a journalist on the ground in the Middle East who speaks to the West about what's really going on. Give us a snapshot of how you see the geopolitics at the moment.

Sharmine Narwani Well, of course, there's, you know, the big U.S.-Iran standoff in the region which occupied us for much of this year. The U.S. has seen Iran as a very convenient enemy to have for the better part of four decades. It's helped the US sell weapons in the region and it helped the U.S cement alliances in the region. It's helped the U.S establish military bases in the region. And, you know, this year, the Americans finally took the fight away from Iran's allies, you know, as we've seen in Syria for the last 10 years, and brought it to Iran with a very belligerent American president. And he got a bit of a shock you know when Iran showed that it can reach any American target and it can do it wisely, too. And that created a deterrent and maybe new rules of engagement. So the Americans backed out of that theatre - the direct confrontation with Iran. And now you see in two important countries - Lebanon and Iraq - that are very conveniently dumped into this sort of Iran axis by adversaries of Iran. And in Lebanon, there's of course, Hezbollah, and there's even the president of Lebanon who's a Christian, tends to side with this side of the axis. In Iraq, you have, you know, a Shia majority, but they're splits, quite frankly. So the new theatres are Lebanon and Iraq. And you're seeing a lot of pressure on these two countries, economically, which basically means when the Americans go high on sanctions, it basically means that they are out of options militarily, at least for the foreseeable future. So that's one good thing. But these sanctions are unlike anything that the region has experienced before. They are meant to starve people. I mean, the currency in Lebanon that has been stable and locked to the dollar for decades has now fallen six fold, eightfold. It just keeps going. And there's a shortage of goods because the Americans have passed this thing called the Caesar Act, which basically stops the the economic activity in Syria. It stops the ability for Syria to reconstruct itself. The Americans have tightened the screws in any way possible. They have held the Lebanese accountable for the Caesar Act, which basically means that the Lebanese cannot trade across the only land border available to them. As you know, you have to have a land border in order to have an economy. So, you know, the screws are put on here. The screws have been put on Iraq as well, you know, attempts to isolate Iran's allies in Iraq. And so the pressure builds in both these theatres. Now, it's my view that pretty much everything the Americans do is bound to backfire. And in this case, you cannot starve a population like Lebanon, a small country of four million people that has land and water resources. You can't starve them. They will find a way. It's like having the Americans have 50 fingers in a dyke. And they expect that the water won't pour out of yet another hole. It will. And what will happen, in my view here, is that Lebanon will forcibly be made to move in to sort of the Iran-Syrian axis because Iran and Syria will do their best, whether it's through smuggling or open transportation of food and medical products here, which are in shortage everywhere. The Americans always sort of push things too far and it creates a backlash and an affect - an unintended affect - that tends to isolate the Americans further in the theatres in which they were trying to gain momentum or gain influence.

Ross Gareth, in that first half, one of the things thematically that I take from it is that in this new multipolar world where countries won't be pushed around as they have been in the past by America and others, there's a moment, if you like, where the U.S. needs all these adversaries. It needs the threat of these bad examples as they paint in the picture. But actually, what's really happened is a lot of these countries have said to the U.S., we've watched your foreign policy for years and years now and actually enough's enough.

Gareth Porter Well, I think you can be assured that the United States, a national security state, that is the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies, as well as the domestic security

agency - the Homeland Security Department - will find an adversary by hook or by crook to justify the continuation of the level of money and power that have been bestowed on that state, that set of bureaucratic entities for many decades now. The question that I would raise at this point is whether we are reaching a breaking point because of the multiple crises that the United States has now begun to enter. We've already experienced the Covid-19 crisis being only the most recent and most obvious one, but a financial crisis that is accompanying that, a political crisis of confidence in the entire political system, on the part of the public, the corrupt nature of the political parties that most Americans have already recognised. And that's only the beginning. There are other crises as well. I think that there is now a chance that the American people will say enough is enough with regard to the power and money that have been given to these bureaucracies year after year. But as you know very well, what has happened over the past couple of years is that the Pentagon has made it clear that we're no longer interested in the war on terror. And in effect, they've downplayed the threat from Iran as well. We are now in competition with the great powers - Russia and China - and that has become the main selling point for continuing the military budget and the intelligence budget, for that matter, as it has been become known by the Pentagon and the CIA and the NSA over the years. So I think clearly they're going to put, you know, 90 percent of the emphasis in the coming years on Russia and China and that's the real game they will be playing.

Ross And you famously call that the racket of national security. Can you just unpack that briefly for us? Why is it such a racket? I mean, to a lot of people it's blatantly obvious. But from your point of view, why is it a racket?

Gareth Porter Absolutely. I'm calling it a racket. And this is a term that I picked up from General Smedley Butler, who was the most decorated Marine Corps General back in the 1930s, a commander of U.S. wars - what he called the banana wars in Central America. And he became a foe of U.S. wars believing that they were benefiting only a few elite people and they were at the expense of the American public, the American people themselves. And so he wrote a book called War Is A Racket. So what I'm now doing is working on a book which I intend to call National Security Is A Racket or As A Racket, I haven't decided which. And I've gone back to the beginning of the Cold War and sort of looking at the entire history of the Cold War and the post-Cold War period and seen that from the beginning and consistently since then, the national security officials - high national security officials - particularly those associated with the Pentagon and the armed services, but also people in the State Department, have essentially carried out a series of deceptions which they used to con the American public into creating a huge rearmament programme beginning in 1950 and then continuing, of course, through the rest of the Cold War. And once things happened during the Cold War, that would have called for an easing of tensions with the Soviet Union and thus, basically a reduction in the strategic armaments of the United States, which were of the essence of this rearmament programme. But of course, the national security state had no intention of allowing that to happen. And so the deceptions continued. And I will document the way in which John F. Kennedy asked his national security advisers to tell him how the U.S. strategic arms posture should change now that they found out that there was no missile gap. And guess what? They told him, well, there's no need for change at all. And so that's just one of many deceptions that I will document in my book. But it is a consistent pattern. And what it means is that this national security state has continued to float on a sea of deception.

Ross When you look at the track record and the facts, I know it's your big business war, the Americans, but ultimately not very good at it are you? Because when you look back at a lot of the conflicts that you've engaged in, there's been an awful lot of bodge jobs. So what happens when you come up against an enemy that is far more powerful and far better equipped and far more ruthless than a lot of the enemies that you've picked to date?

Gareth Porter Look, let me make it very clear. I do not believe for a moment that any of these military services or the civilians at the Pentagon have any intention of going to war with Russia or China. This is simply another part of the game - the deception that has been going on all these years.

Ross Right.

Gareth Porter I mean, the Pentagon has never wanted to go to war with any adversary that was really a serious challenge. They only want to pick on small, weak states, and that's exactly what they've done. And they know perfectly well if they went to war with either Russia or China, it's the end of the game.

Ross Wow! You don't hear that very often.

Gareth Porter Absolutely. You don't hear that. I agree.

Ross That brings us to the media, because one of the things that you've documented is when they're trying to drum up war with Iran, is Mr Netanyahu using these drawings of, apparently, the arms programme over their - the nuclear programme, etc. - none of them are authentic is what you're saying. Why does the media balefully agree from when they see these things to say, actually, you know what, we'll give Mr. Netanyahu a free pass here and we'll report this as a fact?

Gareth Porter There is a fundamental sort of habit of the news media, the corporate news media in this country - and I must say globally - to adopt a narrative toward America's adversaries, that the chosen narrative, the official narrative, that has been developed by the national security state of the US, has been adopted whole - swallowed whole - by corporate news media. And that has become the template that decides what they cover, what they don't cover and how they cover it. And Iran and the coverage of this so-called nuclear archive that Netanyahu claimed that he stole from Tehran, which was a total fabrication all the way, is a perfect example of this. I mean, they'd never bothered to ask any questions that would be obviously asked by any serious news outlet, but instead simply played it as though, you know, they were working for Netanyahu himself. And the same thing is true for stories that have to do with Russia and China, basically. The news media, the corporate news media, have adopted the narratives that govern US policy toward Russia and U.S. policy toward China 100 percent. And they simply will not question.

Ross Look, good luck with the book. We really look forward to it. What's the sort of completion date?

Gareth Porter I don't have a completion date. I'm just getting started. But I'm going to try to make quick work of it because I know how urgent it is to get this done.

Ross Gareth, thank you very much for your time.

Gareth Porter Thank you.

Ross That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.