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The New York Times published a [major story](#) this week, reporting that President Trump recently sought options for a military strike on Iran's nuclear program in response to a new International Atomic Energy Agency report finding that Iran had significantly increased its stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

The utility of this leak cannot be understated, given that a military attack on Iran in the waning days of the Trump administration would not only be an enormously costly endeavor (to put it mildly), but, as the article notes, it would all but derail President-elect Biden's stated intent to rejoin the 2015 nuclear agreement and engage diplomatically with Iran on that and other issues.

Unfortunately, that's about where the usefulness of this report ends, as the piece engages in what many call "threat inflation" by painting a misleading picture of Iran's nuclear program, ignoring key context — such as what might be motivating Iranian behavior — and dancing around the fact that this is a crisis of Trump's own making.

First, the Times significantly downplays the consequences of an American (and/or Israeli) military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities by simply asserting that it "could easily escalate into a broader conflict."

Okay, but what does "broader conflict" mean anyway? To the casual reader, that may not seem all that significant, but a number of years ago, a bipartisan group of former U.S. diplomats, military brass, and government officials [concluded](#) that a military strike could well provoke an "all-out regional war" lasting several years, thereby dismantling the very fragile international coalition assembled by former President Obama to confront Iran's nuclear program and increasing the likelihood that Iran develops a nuclear weapon.

“In addition to costing the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars yearly,” the report said, “a sustained conflict would boost the price of oil and further disrupt an already fragile world economy.” And of course, that assessment did not take into account an attack occurring during a global pandemic that has already devastated economies worldwide.

More recently, one reporter who consulted with more than half a dozen experts concluded that a war between the United States and Iran “[would be hell on earth](#).”

Moreover, the Times frames a potential attack through the lens of horse race politics — “A strike on Iran may not play well to [Trump’s] base, which is largely opposed to a deeper American conflict in the Middle East” — and made no mention of whether or how many Iranians, Americans, or others might die as a result.

The Times’ depiction of Iran’s nuclear program also appears remarkably incomplete. It notes that Iran’s advances beyond the limits set by the JCPOA since Trump withdrew and reimposed sanctions “have been slow and steady.” But the story then casts doubt on Iranian denials that it is seeking to build a weapon, saying “evidence stolen from the country several years ago by Israel made clear that was the plan before 2003.”

But we don’t actually know with certainty what Iran’s “plan” was with regard to its pre-2003 nuclear weapons program. In fact, it’s quite [likely](#) that Iran’s main motivation to produce a nuclear weapon had more to do with deterring [Saddam Hussein](#) than anything else.

Moreover, the public learned from the U.S. intelligence community [back in 2007](#) — not “several years ago” from documents Israel stole — that Iran’s nuclear weapons program ended sometime in 2003, a conclusion that has been reaffirmed numerous times since.

The Times also claimed that the new IAEA report “gave [Trump] the first partial evidence to support” his baseless claims that Iran has been cheating the JCPOA:

Mr. Trump has argued since the 2016 campaign that Iran was hiding some of its actions and cheating on its commitments; the inspectors' report last week gave him the first partial evidence to support that view. The report criticized Iran for not answering a series of questions about a warehouse in Tehran where inspectors found uranium particles, leading to suspicion that it had once been some kind of nuclear-processing facility. The report said Iran's answers were "not technically credible."

The International Atomic Energy Agency has previously complained that inspectors have been barred from fully reviewing some suspected sites.

But the Times is conflating two separate issues here by implying that the uranium particles found in the warehouse occurred after the JCPOA took effect, when in fact the issue in question predates it. And as far as Iran's violations of the deal are concerned, those occurred in view of IAEA monitors — in other words, not cheating — and only after Trump withdrew and reimposed sanctions.

"It is true that Iran is required to allow inspectors timely access to undeclared sites and provide answers to IAEA inquiries, but the IAEA has made it very clear that this about pre-2003 activities," the Arms Control Association's Kelsey Davenport told Responsible Statecraft. "It's fair to say Iran needs to provide more timely and satisfactory cooperation with the IAEA, as it is obligated to do, but this is not 'cheating' on the deal."

Moreover, we have known about Iran's lack of cooperation on this issue for a while now. The IAEA is not reporting it for the first time, as the Times suggests.

"If the New York Times wants to go that route and say failure to cooperate on investigations into past activities is cheating on the JCPOA," Davenport added, "it's still ridiculous to say that we're just now getting 'first partial evidence.' The IAEA detected and [reported on these particles more than a year ago](#)

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Finally, the Times said the entire ordeal "underscored how Mr. Trump still faces an array of global threats in his final weeks in office." But what exactly is the specific threat here? The piece itself noted that Iran's advances in its nuclear program since Trump pulled out of the JCPOA haven't been all that dramatic. And beyond that, there's [strong evidence](#) that Iran's leaders are

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to working with the incoming Biden administration diplomatically; so why would they potentially jeopardize what they clearly see as an opportunity for negotiations by taking aggressive action that would give Trump a pretext for an attack?

And that then leads to what essentially amounts to the elephant in the room that the Times truly failed to address: that Trump himself is 100 percent responsible for the current predicament. Yes, the Times did note that “the Iranians began to slowly edge out of [the limits set by the JCPOA] last year, declaring that if Mr. Trump felt free to violate its terms, they would not continue to abide by them.” But that characterization in no way grasps the enormity of Trump’s failures on Iran.

Indeed, Assal Rad of the National Iranian American Council offered perhaps a more accurate description of what’s actually going on here.

“To be clear, Trump wanted to (& still could) attack Iran to stop its ‘growing nuclear program,’ which is only growing [because] Trump quit the deal that set limits on it,” she [tweeted](#) in response to the Times piece. “This is the definition of a manufactured crisis. Trump wants to bomb away what he created.”

All too often, reporting by American news outlets on international issues depicts foreign actors as having no agency, or worse, and in most cases involving Iran, as hostile and hell-bent on harming the United States or its allies. That dynamic not only does a disservice to the American public, but it also provides space for hawkish elements both inside and outside government to sell their militaristic foreign policy ideas by demonizing foreigners and creating (or perpetuating) the “us versus them” mentality that has mired the United States in endless wars.