

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Is Donald Trump doomed to repeat history in the Middle East?

Emma Ashford

July 29, 2017

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump made waves when he publicly declared that the Iraq War had been a disaster for America, causing chaos in the Middle East. With the rise of ISIS, a refugee crisis, and substantial unrest across the region, it's not hard to see why the majority of Americans now agree with him.

Yet the Trump administration appears poised to make many of the same mistakes in its increasingly belligerent approach to Iran, a strategy virtually guaranteed to increase tensions and worsen regional conflicts.

This month's internal turmoil inside the Trump White House over whether or not to recertify Iran's compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal is only the most recent example of the administration's steps towards a tougher approach against Iran.

In reality, Iran is complying with the terms of the deal. But administration officials have repeatedly sought to shift the goalposts, arguing that Iran is instead violating the "spirit" of the agreement.

Indeed, though the details are not yet clear, the administration's ongoing Iran policy review is widely expected to result in a more assertive and belligerent approach to Iran. In recent testimony, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Congress that the administration intended to support "elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government."

And while others have refuted the idea that regime change is under consideration, the administration's Iran hawks — from Secretary of Defense James Mattis to CIA Director Mike Pompeo — have repeatedly described Iran as "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East."

Whether it takes the form of "ripping up" the nuclear deal, adding new sanctions, or pushing back militarily against Iran in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen, it seems likely that the new administration is headed for a collision with Iran. Yet the assertions and arguments made in favor of taking a harder line against Iran are profoundly misleading.

For starters, the idea that Iran is a threat to the United States comparable to that of the late Soviet Union — an idea expressed in several recent articles — is laughable. The Soviet Union was a supranational state of almost 300 million people with a massive army and civilization-ending nuclear arsenal. Iran, by comparison, has around 82 million citizens and no nuclear weapons.

Iran may be able to threaten American citizens abroad, but it is fundamentally unable to harm the U.S. through military means.

Another common misconception is the idea that Iran is the root of all regional problems.

It is certainly true that Iran's regional influence has grown in recent years, particularly in Iraq. But that growing influence is due less to Iranian revisionism and more to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which removed a regime that acted as a check on Tehran.

And while Iran's behavior in regional conflicts like Syria is reprehensible, it has not alone caused the chaos currently gripping the Middle East.

A variety of factors, including the failed Arab Spring revolutions, the U.S. War in Iraq, and malicious meddling by other regional states from Saudi Arabia to Qatar, have all contributed to today's turmoil.

Even the idea that the Iranian people seek external support for regime change is flawed.

Certainly, many Iranians are hungry for more democratic rights. But the leaders of Iran's 2009 Green movement protests have been clear that they want to improve the system from inside, not overthrow it. There is no true domestic support for the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the group most commonly presented as an alternative by regime-change hawks.

In the absence of domestic support, attempts to conduct "regime change from within," as some administration officials have suggested, is a recipe for failure at best, and disaster at worst.

Ultimately, it remains baffling that the Trump administration — faced with historically high levels of unrest in the Middle East — would voluntarily seek to undermine one of the region's few relatively stable and semi-democratic states.

Donald Trump was right about Iraq during the campaign: the 2003 U.S. invasion was a massive, unforced strategic error. Yet it is a mistake his administration seems poised to make again, albeit on a smaller scale.

If the president forgets history, he is likely only to worsen the chaos in the Middle East.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow at the Cato Institute.