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Bandow: America, not Iran, destabilizes Middle East

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The Obama administration's decision to negotiate with Tehran triggered near hysteria among U.S. politicians and pundits who advocate perpetual war in the Middle East. One complaint is that the talks failed to address Iran's malign regional role.

These critics denounced Tehran's imperial ambitions. For instance, the ever-hawkish Foreign Policy Initiative insisted that "Iran's drive to dominate the region has been years in the making."

However, if Mideast domination is Iran's long-term priority, Tehran has accomplished little. Most governments in the region oppose the Islamic regime and America has far more influence.

In war-torn Syria the Assad regime's reach, and thus Iran's, extends to the Damascus suburbs. Tehran enjoys outsize but not overwhelming influence in small, divided Lebanon.

In Yemen, Tehran is loosely connected to a longtime disaffected rebel movement in a seemingly permanent civil war. Iran matters in Baghdad because George W. Bush removed Iraqi secularist Saddam Hussein, Iran's great nemesis.

Yet the Economist magazine warned that "Iran's belligerent behavior in the Middle East is an increasing menace." More specifically, wrote columnist Jonah Goldberg: "A civilized Iranian regime would presumably stop supporting Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, Bashar Assad in Syria and Shiite militants in Iraq."

No one wants Iran to have a nuclear weapon. But given the region's hostile security environment, it's hard to blame Tehran for proceeding with a nuclear program — which actually began under Washington's ally, the Shah.

The U.S. and Britain ousted post-war Iran's democratically elected prime minister in 1953. After the Shah's fall in 1979 the U.S.-backed Saddam's savage invasion of Iran. Over the years Washington imposed regime change or dismembered territories in several countries posing no threat to America.

The U.S., Turkey and the Gulf States are attempting to oust Iran's Syrian ally. Over the last decade successive American presidents have regularly threatened military action against Tehran. So has Israel. As Henry Kissinger once observed, even paranoids have enemies.

The Iranian regime is ugly, especially to its own people. However, far from being an aggressive empire-builder, the Islamist regime has been a cautious actor dedicated to its own survival. Tehran has done nothing nearly as disastrous in humanitarian or geopolitical terms as the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq.

Moreover, by almost every measure Saudi Arabia's monarchy is worse than Iran's theocracy. Riyadh allows no political opposition and suppresses all non-Sunni faiths.

Saudi Arabia has promoted the intolerant Wahhabist theology. Saudis funded al-Qaida prior to 9/11 and provided 15 of the 19 9/11 terrorists. More recently the Saudi government underwrote extremists in Syria.

Of course the Middle East would be better off without Iran meddling in other nations' affairs. But promiscuous U.S. military action, especially on behalf of authoritarian "allies" such as Saudi Arabia, is an even bigger problem. Washington should stay out of conflicts which are not America's to solve.

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