



US, not Iran, threatens Mideast stability

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The Obama administration's decision to negotiate with Tehran triggered near hysteria among US 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." The group warned of Sanaa, Yemen becoming "the fourth Arab capital to fall under the sway of Tehran."

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, and thus Iran's, reach barely extends to the Damascus suburbs. Tehran enjoys outsize but not overwhelming influence in small, divided Lebanon. In Yemen Tehran is loosely connected to a long-time disaffected rebel movement in a seemingly permanent civil war. Iran matters in Baghdad because US President George W. Bush removed Iraqi secularist Saddam Hussein, Iran's great nemesis. Yet the Economist magazine warned that "Iran's belligerent behaviour 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."

But Iran cannot be expected to supinely accept US or Saudi domination and none of these activities have yielded much geopolitical benefit. Indeed, Washington and Riyadh routinely back flagrant authoritarians and extremists, and oppose democracy and independence movements. Of course, 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 programme—which actually began under Washington's ally, the shah of Iran.

The US and Britain ousted postwar Iran's democratically elected prime minister in 1953. After the shah's fall in 1979, the US 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 US, 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 US statesman Henry Kissinger once observed, even paranoids have enemies. Of course, the existing 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. Yet Washington is helping Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states kill Yemenis. Explained Secretary of State John Kerry: "we're not going to step away from our alliances and our friendships."

Until now Yemen was a local affair. Journalist Peter Salisbury described the conflict as "driven by local issues and competition for resources rather than regional or ideological rivalries." While the Houthis have few good feelings for America, their grievances are purely domestic and they heartily dislike al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Even British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond acknowledged that "the Houthis are clearly not Iranian proxies."

The conflict will be ugly. Even nominal "victory" would not likely be stable, but merely the latest round in an extended fight. The situation is serious, but Washington policy is beyond parody. Announced Kerry, the US was "not going to stand by while the region is destabilized or while people engage in overt warfare across lines, international boundaries and other countries." This from a government which routinely bombs, invades, and occupies other nations. Indeed, Washington empowered Iran and created the Islamic State by invading Iraq.

After negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran the administration plans even more intensive military involvement in the Middle East. Reported the Los Angeles Times, "Obama administration officials are promising a major strengthening of US defence commitments to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf allies, possibly including a nuclear commitment to their security." If reducing the potential Iranian threat actually increases America's commitments, why bother?

Of course the Middle East would be better off without Iranian meddling in other nations' affairs. But promiscuous US 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. The writer, a former special assistant to US President Ronald Reagan, is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

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