



Confronting the Islamic Republic of Iran: Give Peace a Chance

November 30, 2020

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As President Donald Trump prepares to leave office, Iran is leading the news after the assassination of a top Iranian nuclear engineer, likely by Israel with U.S. knowledge if not assistance. The Obama administration criticized a similar Israeli hit in 2012, but Trump lauded the latest murder. He has been fixated on Iran since taking office.

The president's monomania may reflect his determination to reverse Barack Obama's policies. Or perhaps surrounding himself with Israel-friendly hawks did the trick. In any case, Trump effectively turned US policy over to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, with predictably disastrous results.

The president abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, designed to limit Iran's nuclear activities, and launched full-scale economic war against Tehran, his so-called "maximum pressure" campaign. However, MbS and Netanyahu, as well as the coterie of neocons who remain influential in Washington, wanted more and pushed the US toward real war with the Islamic Republic. To Trump's credit, he drew back from exploding the Mideast despite ample encouragement from Washington's bipartisan war party.

Yet his "maximum pressure" campaign backfired spectacularly. Indeed, the issue resulted in his greatest foreign policy failure: Trump has made the Middle East more dangerous, less stable, more repressive, and less free. Iran has been transformed: the young most favorable to the West are disillusioned; relative moderates such as President Hassan Rouhani have been discredited internally; hardline factions most hostile to America have taken over parliament and are likely to win the presidency; few Iranians irrespective of their political persuasion trust Washington to fulfill any future agreements; China and Russia have increased cooperation with Tehran.

Heck 'uva job, Donny!

Of course, Trump's policy malpractice does not ennoble Iran's ruling regime. Tehran's Islamist government is active throughout the Middle East engaging in what US and regional officials uniformly refer to as "malign activities" – as do most of Washington's allies and friends. Moreover, successive US administrations have spent decades turning Tehran into an enemy.

Iran's hostile isolation is a testament to the catastrophic consequences of Washington's persistent, blundering, thoughtless intervention in other nations.

American policymakers insist that the Islamic Republic should reform, becoming liberal and democratic. Yes, it should. However, the US destroyed Iran's brief democratic moment nearly seven decades ago when the Eisenhower administration helped overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a leftish nationalist who planned to nationalize British oil interests.

That coup put Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in power. Authoritarian and corrupt, he lost support of modernizers; determined to forcibly modernize Iranian society, he offended traditionalists. As revolution threatened his regime Carter administration special envoy Gen. Robert E. Huyser told colleagues that he sought to buttress "gutless" Iranian generals by urging them "to kill as many demonstrators as necessary to keep the shah in power."

That effort failed. In 1979 the Shah fled into exile and died shortly thereafter. He left behind a broad revolution captured by Shia fundamentalists, who made a bloody launch of the Islamic Republic. Americans seemed mystified by the intense hatred of people who had suffered under U.S.-supported tyranny for a quarter century.

The seizure of the American embassy and personnel in Tehran led to a nearly 15-month standoff. During the 1980s the US backed the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which cost the Islamic Republic up to a million dead. Washington provided Hussein's government with military intelligence and financial credit, and aided Baghdad's acquisition of the components of chemical weapons, which were used against Iranians. The US reflagged Kuwaiti tankers carrying oil used to raise funds for the Iraqi war effort. The Reagan administration also deployed naval vessels to protect Gulf traffic. One consequence was the accidental 1988 shootdown of an Iranian airliner, killing 290 people.

Despite oft-expressed fears that Tehran essentially planned to conquer the region and reconstitute the ancient Persian Empire, America's defense dependents did far more to undermine regional stability and peace, routinely committing murder and mayhem against their own people. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was totalitarian; despite some social reform, political and religious control today remains almost total. Bahrain and Egypt brutally thwarted demands for democracy. The United Arab Emirates is equally repressive politically. Israel subjected Palestinians to a system of militarized Apartheid for decades. None of these abuses much bothered Washington.

Worse were the external threats posed by America's friends. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait turned the US against its onetime partner. George W. Bush's later invasion of Iraq resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and loosed the Furies throughout the region. The Gulfdoms backed the most radical insurgents against the Bashar al-Assad government, threatening the destruction of Syria's secular system. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates were particularly generous in backing oppressive regimes in Bahrain and Egypt and funding the Libyan civil war. Far worse occurred when Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and their hired allies attacked Yemen. All these conflicts continue to rage, with Tehran little more than a bit player everywhere but Syria.

Nevertheless, the US focused its attention on Iran, threatening war but refusing to negotiate when Tehran indicated its willingness to do so in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. American policymakers also imposed sanctions even though US intelligence agencies agreed that Tehran dropped its nuclear weapons program in 2003.

However, President Barack Obama chose peace over war when he turned to diplomacy, which resulted in the JCPOA, setting important limits on Iranian nuclear activities and creating the most detailed inspection and regulatory regime yet imposed. Washington's hawks, buttressed by the Saudi and Israeli governments, complained that the agreement didn't do everything: permanently bar nuclear activities, eliminate missiles, disband proxy militias, end involvement in neighboring states, free prisoners, and inaugurate democracy – nor trigger the Second Coming.

The accord was limited because Tehran also had a say, and there was strong Iranian opposition even to the clean nuclear accord. Hardliners complained that it was a sellout to war-happy hawks in Washington. Since the nuclear issue was widely recognized as most important – nuclear weapons are more likely than proxy forces to pose an existential threat to other nations – both sides persevered and reached an agreement, imperfect though it was. Adding issues would have required the US to give up more and even then would have made the task well-nigh impossible, since core Iranian security issues were involved. Unsurprisingly, the most fevered complaints about the JCPOA came from those who opposed diplomacy and sought regime change, irrespective of the cost to Iranians and Americans.

When the age of Trump dawned on January 20, 2017 Iran was in compliance with the agreement. The president obviously knew little about the JCPOA other than that it was Obama's creation, which was reason enough for him to hate it. Yet his top officials, including Defense Secretary Jim "Mad Dog" Mattis, urged continued support for the deal. The president's forbearance lasted little more than a year. At which point he dropped the agreement, unleashed a cascade of sanctions, and demanded that Tehran renegotiate and submit to his demands. He seemed certain that the Iranians would come begging: "at a certain point they're going to call me and say 'Let's make a deal,' and we'll make a deal."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a longtime uber-hawk, detailed the administration's terms in an infamous speech in July 2018 at the Heritage Foundation. He demanded that Tehran become a "normal" country, meaning subservient to Washington, and abandon its independent foreign policy and chief defensive weapons, while yielding regional primacy to Saudi Arabia. "Such a negotiation is an instance of surrendering," observed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, assassinated by the administration in January. The US would never submit to such a diktat, but Iran was expected to concede its sovereignty to a government which routinely threatened war. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic regime chose national pride and security over uncertain promises and a few pieces of silver.

US officials still apparently assumed that fire and fury talk would intimidate Tehran. However, Washington's menacing behavior more likely increased Iranian belief that nukes were necessary for defense. How else to defend against the world's ever aggressive and lawless hyper-power,

along with its reckless allies? Even those who might have initially sought a nuclear capacity for bargaining might have come to see it as necessary for defense.

Nor could Tehran count on the administration to keep its commitments. Bad enough was the Trump administration's abandonment of the JCPOA, which could be repeated for another iteration of the agreement. Worse was the Obama administration's regime change operation against Libya's Muammar Khadafy, who had yielded his missile and nuclear programs in return for empty promises from the George W. Bush administration. Yet Trump appeared befuddled when failing to get even one meeting with one Iranian diplomat.

Nevertheless, administration officials mimicked the president's bluster in declaring "maximum pressure" to be a fabulous success. Indeed, after Soleimani's killing administration officials claimed they had strengthened deterrence. Pompeo entitled one speech: "The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example." That was shortly before he publicly whined that the US might have to close the embassy in Baghdad because of rocket attacks by Iranian-backed militias – which is still a possibility, say State Department sources. John Bolton, who forthrightly campaigned for war against Iran, admitted via tweet that "deterrence has not been restored, & coronavirus is not slowing down the ayatollahs."

The result of maximum pressure has been maximum failure. Instead of surrendering, Iran has dramatically ramped up uranium reprocessing, shot down an American drone, interfered with Gulf oil traffic, sent tankers to Venezuela, ramped up irregular and proxy activities in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, devastated Saudi Arabia's petroleum industry, and rained rockets upon US bases and the embassy in Iraq. Moreover, hardliners are in ascendance in Tehran. Even friends of America, including the Europeans, have tired of Washington's attempt to unilaterally impose its anti-Iran policy on the entire world, and refused to cooperate with the Trump administration. If this counts as deterrence restored, what would a world without deterrence look like?

Of course, Pompeo is too intelligent not to recognize his ineffectiveness, even if he is not honest enough to admit it. He long ago dropped any pretense of seeking a negotiated settlement, applying sanctions even to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who helped craft the JCPOA. After the election Pompeo continues to sanction additional activities. This may be mostly a matter of spite since the Iranians refused to surrender, as expected. However, Pompeo also likely hopes to hinder President-elect Joe Biden, who has pledged to reenter the JCPOA.

Indeed, there is suspicion that the assassination of senior Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh was intended to provoke an Iranian response, triggering conflict and thereby preventing engagement with Tehran. As Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute of Strategic Studies observed, the intent of the attack "wasn't to impede Iran's war potential, it was to impede diplomacy." Netanyahu resolutely opposed the JCPOA and would be pleased to have the US at war with Iran. The assassination and other Israeli operations also diminish the likelihood that Iran will make concessions elsewhere, since regional security will require an even greater reliance on asymmetric weapons and tactics.

Biden said he wants to reenter the JCPOA. That is the most sensible course, assuming Iran is willing to move back into compliance. But the time to act will be short: Rouhani's successor will be elected in June and take office in August. A new, hardline president might not be anxious to reenter an accord already abandoned once by the US

Some analysts have urged the new administration to hold off. The accord already is dated, since some provisions are time limited. Moreover, Rouhani's successor could reverse his decision to return to the pact. More hawkish Democrats also contend that the Trump administration's sanctions have created "leverage" for Biden which should be used to wring additional concessions from Tehran.

However, that was precisely Trump's policy – in fact, the new sanctions were supposed to have forced Tehran to surrender a couple years ago. For Biden to channel Trump on sanctions would demonstrate to Iran that American faithlessness is bipartisan and no agreement with the US is worth negotiating. Why should the Islamic Republic tolerate another example of bad faith? Tehran's most obvious response would be to accelerate nuclear activities *to enhance its leverage*. The Europeans, having suffered through two years of dictating and caterwauling by Pompeo might not take kindly to another US administration, which had fervently promised to be different, taking the same approach.

After decades of confronting Iran, Washington should try a different strategy. It should restore diplomatic relations, initiating discussions to banish war threats and address nuclear fears, which have dominated the relationship for decades. The US should shift responsibility for regional security to Middle Eastern countries and encourage them to open a dialogue with Iran. Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates should cooperate on defense: they vastly outspend Iran on the military and have acquired tens of billions of dollars worth hi-tech arms from the US

With the region declining in energy and strategic importance, Washington should disengage from the ongoing Shia-Sunni conflict. The US and Europeans should play the long game, seeking to create opportunities for younger Iranians, in particular, to travel, study, work, and live freely, and ultimately encourage them to transform their own nation. The Biden administration should indicate that it plans to hold America's nominal allies to the same human rights standards as Iran, targeting the sort of misbehavior so often and ostentatiously exhibited. The JCPOA originally offered some hope of encouraging a more open Iran before the pact was short-circuited by continuing sanctions under the Obama administration and sabotage by the Trump administration. This strategy is worth a rerun.

The administration's Iran policy proved to be what Trump hates most, a loser. Biden should seek engagement and do so quickly. The opportunity to pull Iran back into the JCPOA may not last long. He should supplement his offer to return with opportunities for cooperation, trade, and additional sanctions relief. It is vital for Biden to extricate America and Iran from the potentially violent trap set by the outgoing administration and its self-interested Middle Eastern partners. Peace between Tehran and Washington would be the best foundation for security and stability in the Middle East.

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