

Countdown To An Iranian Nuclear Weapon?

If Iran becomes the center of attention again next year, thank the incompetence of Iran hawks.

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As nuclear negotiations with Iran stall in Vienna, a year from now Washington's crisis du jour may be the coming Persian bomb. How to stop Iran from building nuclear weapons?

The nuclear deal will have lapsed. Tehran will be closer to having everything necessary to make a bomb. Israel will be threatening military action, cheered on by Saudi Arabia. Europe will be blaming the Biden administration for having botched negotiations. Donald Trump will put "Halt the Islamic Bomb" at the center of his soon-to-be-announced election campaign. And another disastrous war will loom.

If only Hollywood hosted an awards show for politics. Not just Oscars for most popular and successful politicians, awards should be given to the worst performers. Shoo-ins this year would be Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu.

When President Donald Trump arrived in January 2017, Iran's nuclear program was contained through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), negotiated by his predecessor, Barack Obama. Iran's nuclear efforts, which had triggered multiple threats of war from Washington, were tightly restricted and carefully monitored. There was much not to like in Tehran's other behavior—political repression and religious persecution at home, malicious intervention throughout the Middle East. However, Washington forgives much more from the Sunni bloc, which includes multiple murderous, aggressive autocracies, most notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, Trump became the Saudi's chosen instrument despite their lengthy list of crimes. Saudi money and people made 9/11 happen. In 2015, Riyadh launched an aggressive war against its impoverished neighbor Yemen, creating a humanitarian catastrophe. Later, while enjoying Washington's patronage, the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, organized the particularly gruesome murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Trump entered office with no understanding of the JCPOA—he apparently believed that the return of Iran's money was a payment by the U.S.—and a hysterically inflated view of his personal negotiating prowess. In fact, other nations found him to be a pushover once lavished with praise. At the urging of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had ostentatiously interfered on behalf of the Republican Party, Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and imposed a tough new sanctions regime.

At which point everything that could go wrong did go wrong.

First, the administration demanded Iran's surrender. This ensured not only that negotiations would fail, but that negotiations would not occur. Tehran would not reward Washington for breaking the agreement, especially after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted that Iran surrender its independent foreign policy and military deterrent as well as nuclear program. All that was missing from Pompeo's 12 points was a requirement that the Islamic Republic make Donald Trump head of state.

The sanctimony was particularly grotesque. The Obama and Trump administrations had made Americans accomplices to war crimes by supporting aggressive Saudi military operations in Yemen—providing and servicing planes, supplying munitions, refueling aircraft, and sharing intelligence. Trump demanded that Iran drop its far smaller arms supplies to the Yemeni insurgents. Even more shameless was Pompeo's command that Iran respect Iraq's sovereignty—after Washington had invaded the latter, ousted its government, and written its constitution.

Second, the U.S. failed to win over other JCPOA members and allies. In his “surrender or die” speech to Tehran, Pompeo declared: “I ask that America's allies join us in calling for the Iranian Government to act more responsibly.” They did—while continuing to support the agreement they had helped forge. The Europeans recognized that Iran was unlikely to make concessions to a government which refused to honor its previous commitments. Indeed, the Europeans created a new facility to shield humanitarian trade from U.S. sanctions and summarily, even contemptuously, rejected Washington's attempt to pose as a continuing JCPOA member to reimpose sanctions. Only the hapless Dominican Republic supported Washington's latter position.

Third, Iran refused to reply even after Trump went from asking to begging. As the U.S. presidential election neared, Trump publicly offered Tehran a better deal if it would meet and give his reelection campaign a boost. The Iranians ignored his embarrassing plea, leaving the issue to his successor.

Fourth, Tehran moved ahead with its nuclear program. The Iranian regime also interfered with Gulf oil traffic, supplied petroleum to Venezuela, launched rocket attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq, destroyed Saudi oil facilities, and targeted America's embassy in Baghdad. (The Trump administration's assassination of Qasem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, intensified Iranian retaliation.) Pompeo then sacrificed what little US prestige remained, whining that he would have to close the embassy if the Iraqi government could not defend it—a dramatic sign of American weakness.

Washington also lost face when it failed to retaliate for Iran's strike on the Kingdom. Riyadh desperately tried to build public pressure on Trump to act, without success. With the president exposed as the poseur his critics long charged, the chastened royals moved toward talks with Iran and closer relations with Russia. To the good, the loss of Saudi confidence in Washington as the defender of last resort pushed the Gulf States towards diplomacy, a positive if unintentional impact of U.S. policy.

Fifth, Iran is closer to becoming a nuclear threshold state. Observed Danny Citrinowicz, head of the Iran branch of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani “became so weakened and understood that nothing would change, he decided to break every

restriction that had been placed on the regime.” Rouhani’s successor, Ibrahim Raisi, is even less committed to the agreement.

Iran hawks are pushing a scare campaign to build support for military action, claiming Tehran might be just weeks or months away from possessing enough fissile material to make an atomic bomb. In fact, much more is required to make a weapon. Former Mossad head Yossi Cohen observed: “I think that at the end of the day, Iran is not close to reaching any nuclear weapons. It is no closer than before.” Nevertheless, Tehran’s ability to change that is more evident. Complained Israel’s Lt. General Gadi Eisenkota, the U.S. withdrawal was a “net negative for Israel: It released Iran from all restrictions, and brought its nuclear program to a much more advanced position.”

Sixth, hardline Islamists took full control of Iran’s government. Although moderation is relative in the Iranian political system, even Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate recognized Rouhani’s interest in reaching a nuclear agreement. Citrinowicz lauded the JCPOA: “The agreement—with all of its flaws—rolled back the Iran nuclear program significantly, more than any other clandestine activity that was aimed at doing the same. Those clandestine activities may have suspended or delayed the program a little bit, but nothing at the level of the JCPOA.”

The Trump administration made Rouhani look like a fool and greatly strengthened Islamist hardliners, who won both parliamentary and presidential elections. The result was a “catastrophe,” said Citrinowicz: “The Iranians pushed through all of the obstacles, and all the problems that they had and now they are pushing forward in the enrichment, going further in violating restrictions than I could have ever imagined that they would.” Although Raisi, elected in June, favors the agreement, he is less willing to make concessions to bring the JCPOA back into force.

Seventh, the Raisi government disproved the Trump administration’s claim that the reimposition of sanctions increased US leverage, allowing Washington to push for tougher terms. Instead, Tehran, apparently convinced that it can survive sanctions with the assistance of Beijing and Moscow and more skeptical of the value of American promises, dropped previous concessions while adding requirements. Iran demanded compensation for losses, cancellation of all sanctions, even for conduct unrelated to the nuclear program, preservation of nuclear investments made after Washington’s walk-out, and guarantees that no future administration will withdraw from the agreement.

Eighth, the U.S. government is again uttering generic, hackneyed phrases indicating possible military action. An Iranian nuclear weapon would destabilize the Middle East, but that would not make it a *casus belli* for America. Since Iranian officials show no evidence of being suicidal, such a weapon would not put America directly at risk. Indeed, throughout the entire U.S.-Iranian relationship Washington has been the aggressor, from supporting the 1953 coup to backing Saddam Hussein’s invasion to shooting down an Iranian civilian airliner. What an Iranian nuclear weapon would do *is deter the U.S. from attacking Iran*, actually a mutual benefit. The negative impacts of Mideast proliferation would reinforce the need for a diplomatic resolution, not another U.S. war.

Military action could delay but not necessarily halt an Iranian nuclear program. As if Muammar Khadafy’s brutal fate was not evidence enough of Tehran’s need for nuclear weapons to protect itself, a failed U.S. assault would reinforce Iran’s commitment to nuclear weapons. Moreover,

war with Iran would be no cakewalk for America, given Tehran's ability to strike outside its borders in multiple ways. Another U.S. war against yet another majority Muslim nation likely would generate greater upheaval throughout the Middle East and South Asia. Yet again, an administration pivot to Asia would be stillborn.

Talk of war with Iran should highlight the need for the U.S. to abandon its military-first foreign policy. Washington policymakers long shared the view of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that possessing a wonderfully powerful military means it should be used. The potential deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents—as a result of sanctions as well as war—are but a minor consideration for America's foreign policy elite.

Ultimately, regional stability requires a political *modus vivendi*. That may seem distant today, but ongoing negotiations between Iran and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE offer a promising start. War is simply not a useful option.

Iran is a bad actor, but so are America's nominal allies and friends. Blame for today's incipient nuclear crisis belongs to Trump and Netanyahu, whose irresponsible policies made an Iranian bomb more likely. Now, President Joe Biden must revive a diplomatic solution. Failure to save the JCPOA would ensure instability and make war more likely, a potential catastrophe for the region and America.

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