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Washington's Dangerous Fixation on Iran

Doug Bandow

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United States President Donald Trump appears to worry a lot about Iran, a concern that is shared by his secretary of state and national security adviser. They were so worried about a nuclear Iran that they revoked the international agreement known as the Iran deal, which was supposed to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. Instead, Trump now demands Iran's de facto surrender. However, the administration is so far is backed only by Israel and Saudi Arabia, which want America to do their dirty work.

Why is the Trump administration so fearful of Tehran? Iran is a struggling regional power. It lags well behind its competitors in economic and military clout. Even its greatest enemy, Saudi Arabia, dismisses the Islamic Republic as being no match.

Additionally, Iran clearly is not in America's league. The U.S. has a vastly bigger economy, far more powerful military, the globe's dominant culture and is allied with most of the industrialized world—at least until President Donald Trump initiated a misguided trade war against Washington's allies.

Nor does the Middle East matter much to America anymore. The U.S. is becoming the world's leading energy producer, and other sources are being developed, diminishing the importance of the region's oil. Israel has become a regional superpower and is cooperating with Saudi Arabia, eliminating their need for Washington's protection. What little remains of the Islamic State should be left to those it threatened- virtually every other state in the region. Furthermore, Syria is a tragedy that is mostly best left to its neighbors.

Even claims that Iran is a terrorist state aren't true, at least in the usual sense that most Americans understand. Instead, Washington complaints are about Iran's support for Hezbollah and Hamas, two quasi-governments which periodically battle Israel.

Would it be better if Tehran cut off its support for them? Of course, but what Middle Eastern power doesn't meddle in the affairs of others? The list of Middle East actors that have acted up and intervened in each other's affairs is a long one.

Israel routinely bombs Syria, having blown up that nation's nuclear reactor and more recently having targeted Iranian forces fighting on behalf of the Syrian government. Israel also assassinated a Hamas operative in Dubai while maintaining the more than half a century-long occupation of Palestinian territories.

Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen, sent troops to Bahrain to support their dictatorial monarchy, sent money to Egypt to help their dictatorial military regime, backed efforts to overthrow Syria's Bashar al-Assad and even kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister. Riyadh also continues to promote the fundamentalist Wahhabist strain of Islam throughout the Middle East and around the world.

The United Arab Emirates has joined with Saudi Arabia in several of these malign efforts. Turkey initially aided ISIS in Syria and later intervened in both Iraq and Syria, grabbing territory and combatting Kurdish forces. Finally, Qatar has backed opposition groups, which were usually radical, in Syria and Libya.

In other words, no one's hands are clean. Tehran is terrible, but on most measures, Saudi Arabia's repression and aggression are notably worse than Iran's.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of how Iran's specter haunts America is that it forecloses serious domestic introspection about Washington's Middle Eastern policies. This is unfortunate because the U.S. bears much responsibility for what Iran and the surrounding region have become today- but America seems unlikely to recognize that anytime soon.

The starting point for modern U.S.-Iran relations is the 1953 coup which overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. He had come to power in a democratic vote, but America used force to oust him. It is true that he had plenty of domestic enemies and that America was not alone in its effort. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many Iranians, Washington became the prime architect of their future misery from that point onward.

The Shah of Iran turned from a constitutional ruler into an absolute one and, with U.S. backing, created a vicious police state which sought to modernize a traditional people forcibly. Along the way, he even began a nuclear weapons program, and many of his enemies became America's enemies. Tragically, the most virulent and violent of the Shah's enemies, Ayatollah Khomeini, pushed aside more moderate elements in the struggle for power after the Shah fled into U.S. exile.

In addition, after Iraq's Saddam Hussein—yes, that Saddam Hussein!—invaded Iran, the U.S. even backed the aggressor. Washington sent Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad in 1983 to confer with its new de facto ally. America provided intelligence, reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers— the proceeds of which were lent to Hussein to fund his war— and sold dual-use products which Iraq turned into chemical weapons. Along the way the U.S. Navy also shot down an Iranian airliner, mistaking the plane for a belligerent attacker.

Since then, Washington has threatened Iran with a military attack, imposed economic sanctions, launched cyber-attacks, armed the Islamic Republic's Gulf enemies, and sought to overthrow Tehran's only close ally, Syria. Whatever the justification for these policies on independent grounds, they have created an unmistakably hostile policy in Iran's mind.

Tehran deserves blame but is hardly alone in its support for violent organizations. Indeed, imagine the enormous liability if the victims of U.S.-backed forces—Syrian soldiers killed by insurgents, Soviet soldiers lost fighting the Mujahideen, Nicaraguans who died at the hands of the Contras, Vietnamese killed by the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government, and anyone dead in an American bombing or drone attack—could sue Washington. The tab might bankrupt the country.

On October 23, 1983, a suicide bombing at the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut killed 241 Americans. The U.S. had intervened, nominally as a peacekeeper, in the Lebanese civil war, which had been raging since 1975. (The Pentagon up through Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger opposed the president's decision to deploy American forces.) Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll blamed Hezbollah, which the firm claimed acted with Iran's backing. The lawyers filed suit under U.S. law, which creates an exception for terrorism lawsuits from normal sovereign immunity for governments.

The attack, including one against French military forces, was awful. I remember hearing the news in the pre-Internet age. But truth be told, the U.S. government, headed by the president for whom I worked, Ronald Reagan, bears primary responsibility for the American deaths.

The more significant problem, however, is that the barracks bombing was not a terrorist attack. The action was an act of war, and therefore a legal response to U.S. military intervention.

President Reagan presented Washington's involvement as "peacekeeping," but there was no peace to keep. There were more than a score of armed factions—Weinberger figured twenty-seven or twenty-eight—which represented different faiths, tribes, allies, and leaders and whose allegiances often shifted. Israel and Syria had also joined Iran in seeking to influence the outcome.

The U.S. became just another belligerent and thus made more than its share of enemies. American forces began by training the Lebanese army and offered live military support.

Michah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations noted that "by summer 1983 [the U.S.] had openly sided with the pro-Israeli Lebanese government. To support the Lebanese military, the U.S.S. New Jersey was authorized to shell the Druze militia and Syrian military forces in the mountains surrounding Beirut." Shia fighters also were targeted. Historian Patrick Brogan noted that U.S. naval fire offered "convincing proof the U.S. was no longer neutral."

The Christian Science Monitor reported that, prior to the attack on the barracks, "two American warships had bombarded antigovernment artillery and missile batteries." Alas, "the Lebanese army did a poor job ... of calling in the bombing coordinates," misdirecting the fire. A military investigation found that some shells missed their targets by as much as 10,000 yards (5.6 miles).

Tim McNulty of the Chicago Tribune wrote: “Everybody loved the New Jersey until she fired her guns. Once she fired, it was obvious she couldn’t hit anything,” or, at least, anything she intended. Compounding this issue was that civilian casualties received scant attention in the U.S. media. As Researcher Franklin Lamb wrote in 2013, many Lebanese homes damaged by the American bombardment and remained unrepaired, along with unremoved, unexploded shells.

The U.S. steadily became an ever more active combatant. In early 1984 the Washington Post reported that “The 16-inch guns of the U.S. battleship New Jersey fired hundreds of rounds at artillery positions of Syria and its Lebanese allies in Lebanon’s eastern and central mountains today in the heaviest American naval barrage since the Vietnam War.” The Monitor observed: “Two American nurses who worked in Lebanon say that the use of United States Navy guns in support of the Lebanese army turned many Druze Muslims against the United States.” For instance, Walid Jumblatt, still head of the Druze decades later, explicitly threatened retaliation for U.S. attacks.

According to historian Benis M. Frank, who authored *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1984*, Marine Corps commander, Col. Timothy Geraghty “recognized that providing U.S. naval gunfire support for the [Lebanese army] had changed the nature of his mission. The Marines were now considered legitimate targets by anti-government forces.” As Geraghty explained: “The firing we did in support” of the Lebanese army “moved us from a previous, very careful, razor edge line of neutrality that we were walking, and treating all the Lebanese communities alike ... to a different category.” Soon the Marines were referring to anti-government forces as the “enemy.”

Lebanese fighters, who lacked America's long-range firepower, found another way to strike back. As Colin Powell later explained, “When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American ‘referee’ had taken sides against them. And since they could not reach the battleship, they found a more vulnerable target: the exposed Marines at the airport.” Furthermore, one Pentagon commission called the attack “tantamount to an act of war using the medium of terrorism.”

The Marines did not deserve to die. However, the most important cause of their deaths was not terrorism, Hezbollah, Iran, or even the Islamic Jihad Organization. It was the U.S. government turning them into combatants in another nation’s impossibly bitter and complicated civil war. Indeed, after the bombing, even Reagan came to realize that making Lebanon’s fight America’s fight was a huge mistake, and he withdrew American forces. Today, continuing to blame Iran might allow U.S. officials to shirk responsibility for their errors— but it does nothing to make the region more stable or peaceful.

Tehran is a malign actor in the Middle East, but so are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Turkey, and Iraq. Instead of treating Iran as the locus of all evil, Washington needs to develop a more balanced policy for the region. That includes acknowledging how America has dramatically contributed to the Mideast’s problems, including with Iran.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.