



Washington's Hypocritical Iran Obsession

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Since Joe Biden took office as president in January, there has been considerable speculation about the prospects for successful U.S. negotiations with Iran to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding Tehran's nuclear program. President Donald Trump effectively torpedoed that agreement when he rescinded Washington's adherence to its provisions in 2018. The chances of resuscitating the JCPOA remain uncertain, even as tensions between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue continue to simmer.

However, ongoing suspicions about nuclear matters is not the only manifestation of ill-will between Washington and Tehran. Two other recent developments are notable, and the Biden administration's stance on both of them highlights the chronic blind spots and hypocrisy that have plagued US policy toward Iran for the past four decades.

In late May, the Iranian government dispatched two of its ships, a frigate and a converted oil tanker, on a voyage that US leaders worried might end up in Venezuela as a symbol of support for Nicolas Maduro's beleaguered, anti-U.S. regime. The Biden administration reacted like a scalded cat. U.S. officials warned Caracas that such a deployment would be an unwise provocation. A National Security Council spokesperson later emphasized that Venezuela had purchased weapons from Iran over a year ago, and warned that any new delivery of weapons "would be a provocative act and a threat to our partners in this hemisphere."

Washington's double standard was extraordinarily blatant. The United States and its NATO allies maintain a large, ongoing naval presence in the Persian Gulf right on Iran's doorstep. US officials apparently do not consider that deployment of massive Western military power a provocation of any sort. Yet, Tehran's decision to send a pair of ships from its second-rate navy into Washington's general neighborhood is supposedly a dangerous provocation. The willful blindness of US leaders on this score is breathtaking. A satirical cartoon that circulated on Facebook last year effectively captured the hypocrisy. It showed a map of Iran along with the sites of US military installations in the region. The caption stated: "Iran Clearly Wants War. Look How Close They Put Their Country to Our Military Bases." US leaders seem to operate under a similar assumption.

The other recent telling development was a statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin emphasizing that the United States remains fully committed to the "defense" of Saudi Arabia.

His comment was an unobvious warning to Iran, Saudi Arabia's principal regional rival, despite recent modest improvements in relations between Tehran and Riyadh. Austin's posture also reflects a longstanding US bias. Administrations since the early 1980s have regarded Iran as the main disruptive factor in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia as a stabilizing, status quo player. That perception has led Washington to overlook the Saudi government's dreadful human rights record and support Riyadh's atrocious war against Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen.

Indeed, any willingness by parties in the Middle East to maintain close ties with Tehran is a recipe for becoming a target for US vengeance. In the simplistic world view of US officials and most of America's foreign policy community, other nations or movements cannot be "allies" of Iran. Even limited collaboration automatically makes them Iranian "proxies" and "terrorists" posing a threat to regional peace and stability. Thus, the Houthis are not simply fighting an internal struggle against a Saudi-backed regime, they are fulfilling Iran's nefarious agenda. Hezbollah is not merely a Lebanese political faction, but an Iranian puppet targeting Israel and other US "friends." A key reason why the United States has sought to unseat Syria's secular dictator, Bashar al-Assad, despite the high risk of a post-Assad Syria becoming another playground for jihadists, was Assad's willingness to be Tehran's most prominent regional ally.

A far more sober, restrained US policy is desperately needed. US leaders must stop treating every move by Tehran as a horrid threat to regional and global peace. They also need to engage in the mental exercise of trying to view Washington's actions from Iran's perspective. The imposition of ever-tougher economic sanctions and the ongoing attempt to isolate Iran internationally has become an ineffectual US vendetta, and certainly is viewed that way in Tehran. Likewise, the maintenance of a massive US/NATO naval and air presence in and around the Persian Gulf would be considered a menacing posture by any Iranian government. A US military drawdown and the commencement of a serious effort to normalize relations with Iran are steps that are long overdue.

Washington needs to adopt a different overall regional policy as well. The notion that Saudi Arabia is a US "friend" and a stabilizing power is belied by Riyadh's lengthy list of contrary behavior. And in terms of domestic repression, Saudi Arabia's record on human rights is even worse than Iran's. If a situation ever cried out for strict US neutrality between two contending powers, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is that situation.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to break with its predecessors and adopt a new strategy toward Iran that moves back from the brink of war and injects some badly needed consistency and integrity to US policy. Unfortunately, there are no indications so far that either the president or his advisers are inclined to take the necessary steps.

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