

# The Washington Post

## Iran's 'behavior' isn't threatening Americans. Don't use that pretense to scrap the nuclear deal.

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November 29, 2017

In a speech Tuesday at the Wilson Center in Washington, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the Trump administration is “committed to addressing the totality of the Iranian threat,” asking America’s allies “to join us in standing up to all of Iran’s malign behavior,” including its “support for terrorist organizations” and “active ballistic missile development program.”

He echoed President Trump’s rationale last month for decertifying the Iran nuclear deal, an Obama-era agreement that put a lid on Iran’s nuclear program by imposing a set of restrictions and a comprehensive inspections regime. Like Tillerson, Trump cited two issues that lie outside the deal itself: Iran’s support for proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and Houthi rebels in Yemen; and Iran’s development of ballistic missiles.

But the obsession with these Iranian policies amounts to threat inflation. Neither poses a serious threat to America’s domestic security or core national interests and they don’t warrant jettisoning a thus-far successful nuclear nonproliferation agreement.

As Thomas Juneau recently argued for The Post, “Tehran’s support for the Houthis is limited, and its influence in Yemen is marginal.” They aren’t primarily Iranian proxies, but characterizing them as such serves a narrative perpetuated by the Saudi Arabian government, the Iranian regime’s chief regional rival. Hamas barely holds on to power in Gaza, one of the most impoverished, densely populated and smallest slices of territory in the world.

Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group and political party based in Lebanon, functions as an Iranian proxy and has, in the past, been linked to attacks on Americans: the group was implicated in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack; in Beirut in 1983 and 1984, Hezbollah targeted the U.S. Marine Corps barracks and the U.S. Embassy annex, respectively, killing 243 Americans, attempting to force a U.S. military withdrawal. But unlike al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, there’s not much today to suggest that Hamas’s, Hezbollah’s or the Houthi rebels’ mission is attacking United States.

Trump says Iran is “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism,” while Sen. John McCain warns that, “A web of Iranian proxies” threatens the “stability, freedom of navigation and the territory of our partners and allies.” Even though the Iran deal deliberately disaggregated

Iran's support for these groups from the issue of its nuclear ambitions, Trump has heaped the issues together rhetorically to argue that he has no choice but to tear the deal up.

Not only does that obfuscate the aim of the deal, but it serves to obscure the fact that the United States looks away as Iran's rivals engage in behavior that is similar, or worse, than Iran's. For several years now, the Saudis, with American support, have relentlessly bombed Yemen in a campaign against the Houthis that has resulted in a humanitarian crisis. In addition to being investigated by the United Nations for war crimes, one of the consequences of the Saudi's military campaign has been to bolster the position of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi actions have had greater negative impact on U.S. interests, in terms of regional destabilization, intensification of a proxy war and the expansion of al-Qaeda, than Iran's support for the Houthis.

In contrast to the regional agendas of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Saudis have long been implicated in promoting and exactly the kinds of Sunni militant groups that try to target the U.S.: the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other Sunni militant groups boosted by the Saudis have perpetrated more than 94 percent of deaths caused by Islamic terrorism since 2001. If we can tolerate such behavior from an ally such as Saudi Arabia, surely Iran's support for its proxies is a poor excuse for scuttling an agreement that effectively restrains an Iranian nuclear weapons program.

According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies, Iran is not known to possess and reportedly does not seek, missiles that can reach U.S. territory. The Pentagon, as well as the U.S. Institute of Peace, have repeatedly assessed in recent years that Iran's military posture is defensive in nature. Earlier this year, with respect to Iran, Sen. Tom Cotton said, "I don't see how anyone can say America can be safe as long as you have in power a theocratic despotism." Presumably, though, Cotton makes an exception for the despotic, theocratic regime in Riyadh that enjoys bipartisan Washington support.

At any rate, Iran is profoundly unlikely to attack the United States. America possesses an overwhelming nuclear deterrent; and we remain the world's largest economy, with a GDP 50 times that of Iran. Iran's annual military spending is around 5 percent of ours and 9 percent of their region's total. Iran has a large army — around a half million troops — but can't meaningfully project power beyond the Middle East.

Indeed, Iran's regional behaviors are only a threat to the United States to the extent that we continue to insist on meddling unnecessarily in a region whose strategic importance has been overstated for decades. We have thousands of troops and multiple bases in the region, and we've been in a constant state of war there for years with little to show for it. The prevailing strategic rationales for America's excessive over-involvement in the Middle East — defending Israel, fighting terrorism and protecting the free flow of oil — don't even come close to justifying the costs of pursuing them.

Even if Iran challenges other regional powers, that's not a reason to get rid of a deal that prevents it from gaining nuclear weapons. It makes nonproliferation a more crucial security priority than ever.

Abandoning the nuclear deal doesn't make Israel any safer: Most of Israel's military and intelligence community agrees that facing an Iran with a nuclear program under tight inspections and limitations is better than facing an Iran with an expanding nuclear program hidden from international monitors. When it comes to Saudi Arabia, we're applying a double standard. And when it comes to directly safeguarding U.S. security, we're safer when we don't elect to adopt the region's problems as our own.

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