

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

A Hotline With Iran? Dealing with Governments We Loathe

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A September 19 story in the *Wall Street Journal* [indicated](#) ^[3] that U.S. officials might be interested in establishing a military hotline with Iranian forces to reduce the danger of clashes in the Persian Gulf. Both the White House and Pentagon quickly stated that there were no “formal proposals” along those lines, but informal feelers are probably another matter entirely.

Setting up such a hotline is a perfectly sensible idea. Yet there is apparent resistance within the American military and foreign policy bureaucracy. Iranophobes apparently believe that such a step would confer greater legitimacy on the Iranian government at a time when U.S. policy makers hope that a growing domestic opposition may be able to topple the increasingly unpopular clerical regime. There is even more intense, specific resistance if the establishment of a hotline requires direct communications with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. But the IRGC is the source of most of the “near miss” incidents between Iranian naval vessels and U.S. ships in recent years. It does not seem desirable or even possible to cut the IRGC out of the hotline process.

U.S. foot dragging on a reasonable, perhaps even essential, proposal to reduce tensions illustrates a recurring problem in Washington’s dealings with regimes that it dislikes. One U.S. official contended that the United States has a long history of talking to its enemies, both during hot wars and cold. But that argument is subtly misleading. All too often, talks with adversarial regimes are conducted sporadically, at low levels or through third parties, and with a lack of realism. (Eschewing even a hint of reciprocity and presenting a laundry list of demands that have no chance of being accepted is frequently U.S. standard operating procedure in such discussions.) That is especially true regarding regimes with which Washington has no formal diplomatic relations.

It is an attitude that needs to change. Diplomacy would be easy if all of our interlocutors were nice, friendly, democratic countries. But we don’t live in an international system heavily populated by New Zealands, Great Britains, Chiles,

and Czech Republics. Indeed, a significant percentage of regimes are downright odious.

Nevertheless, there are issues and occasions that require sustained, not intermittent, dialogue. And sometimes diplomacy must be conducted at fairly high levels to prevent disastrous conflicts. Such dialogue should not be seen as conferring legitimacy on a hostile regime—and in most cases legitimacy is not something the United States has the power to confer or withhold.

Preventing an accident or miscalculation between Iranian and U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf should certainly be a high priority for intelligent policymakers. Establishing a hotline would be a good first step. It might even lead gradually to a thawing of the ugly, unproductive, and dangerous cold war with Iran, which is now in its fourth decade.