

Trump Cannot Afford To Shut Out Iran If He Wants To Defeat ISIS

Divisive diplomacy and religious bans won't lead to sustainable peace in Syria and the region.

🕒 01/31/2017 12:29 pm ET



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Seyed Hossein Mousavian

Former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council



CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

The executive order signed by Trump imposes a travel ban on refugees entering the U.S. and a hold on travelers from Syria, Iran and five other Muslim-majority countries.

Throughout his campaign, U.S. President Donald Trump vowed that confronting terrorism and destroying the self-proclaimed Islamic State would be his highest foreign policy [priority](#). Since assuming office, however, he has taken measure after measure that [exacerbates](#), rather than alleviates, the threat of terrorism. His "[secret](#)" plan to confront ISIS has so far turned out to just be an order to the Pentagon to develop a plan to destroy the organization — which, [according](#) to some reports, would not be a radical departure from the current anti-ISIS campaign. Other actions he has taken or seems poised to take — on immigration, Iran and Russia — will actively harm efforts to combat the terrorist group.

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Trump’s current foreign policy approach is not only self-defeating, but also forgoes a golden opportunity.

Trump’s current foreign policy approach is not only self-defeating, but also forgoes a golden opportunity to shape a coherent strategy that would allow him to usher in a political solution to the Syrian war, destroy ISIS and repair U.S. ties with the Kremlin. Improved U.S-Russia relations will also open the door to Moscow serving as an interlocutor facilitating mutually beneficial U.S.-Iran engagement.

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Iranian grandmother Marzieh Moosavizadeh in her hotel room in El Segundo after she was detained at LAX in California on Jan. 29, 2017 due to Trump’s executive order.

Rather than pursue strategically wise diplomacy, however, Trump has started his presidency by signing a controversial executive order on immigration; [banning](#) temporarily immigrants and visitors and from seven Muslim-majority countries — with an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees. Not only does this move [defy](#) legal precedent, it has also torn apart countless families and [upended lives across](#) the [world](#). By failing to distinguish between extremists and the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, the racially inflammatory executive order also utterly fails in its aim of thwarting terrorism and in fact is a [boon](#) to terrorist groups like ISIS. It bars [over](#) 200 million people from entry in the United States, even as [studies](#) have shown that no individuals from these countries have committed terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

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Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has said the ban is a ‘great gift to extremists’



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As Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has [said](#), the ban is a “great gift to extremists” and “aids terrorist recruitment by deepening fault-lines exploited by extremist demagogues.” The Iranian Foreign Ministry also [responded](#) to Trump orders by stating it was “considering” taking a reciprocal action, but unlike the U.S. ban, will not apply it to Americans who already have visas. Iran is one of the seven Muslim-majority countries targeted by Trump’s executive order. Millions of people of Iranian background [in America](#) and across the world have been [affected](#) — whether it be because they are on [student](#) or work visas, have [green cards](#), or are [dual-Iranian nationals](#) with any other country. Iranian-Americans, for their part, have [contributed](#) immensely to U.S. society and are among America’s [most successful](#) immigrant groups. This ban not only reinforces elements in Iran which have always [argued](#) that the U.S. government cannot be trusted, but also signals to Iranians of every political stripe that Washington [views](#) them with discriminatory disdain.

Trump Poised to Pursue Self-Defeating Syria, ISIS Strategies



KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV VIA GETTY IMAGES

Iran’s important role in Syria was demonstrated last week in two days of landmark [negotiations](#) over the Syrian war in Astana, Kazakhstan.

On top of the executive order, which promises to add fuel to the war in Syria by empowering groups like ISIS, unsubstantiated rumors are [circulating](#) that the Trump administration [wishes](#) to reach a solution in Syria at the expense of Iran. If so, this is a recipe for disaster and will guarantee the failure of diplomacy. Iran, long at the forefront of the fight against ISIS, has significant leverage on the ground in Syria and has participated in the Geneva process since [2015](#). It is eager to use its leverage to reduce the level of violence and bring about a lasting peace in Syria. But if the U.S. tries to forcefully exclude it from negotiations and approach it in a zero-sum manner, it will have no choice but to use the many tools available to it to thwart such efforts.



Iran's important role in Syria was demonstrated last week in two days of landmark [negotiations](#) over the Syrian war in Astana, Kazakhstan. The talks marked the [first time](#) in nearly six years of war that representatives of the Syrian government and armed opposition negotiated directly. Brokered by Turkey, Iran and Russia — the latter two the Syrian government's main backers and the former a leading supporter of the rebels — the negotiations ended with a signed [agreement](#) by the outside powers to uphold the fragile country-wide cease-fire and set up a trilateral body to monitor and enforce it.

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Iran, long at the forefront of the fight against ISIS, has significant leverage on the ground in Syria.

By bringing the government and opposition together and solidifying support for the cease-fire, the three convening powers moved the warring parties one step closer to a political agreement. The joint statement they [released](#) at the end of the talks also affirmed their support for the underlying principles of the Geneva process, the peace talks led for years by the United Nations and the United States. While the Geneva process has long [stalled](#) and struggled to implement its agreed-to principles, the Iran-Russia-Turkey-led diplomatic initiative, as exemplified by Astana, has proven able to bring together the real stakeholders in the conflict, both inside and outside the country. If complemented with the Geneva framework as [planned](#), a peaceful settlement to the Syria crisis — and an end to the suffering of millions of innocents — will be in reach.

Russia and Iran Must Be on Board in Diplomatic Efforts



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The fact that Iran joined Russia and Turkey in driving the Astana talks, which relegated U.S. participation to [observer status](#) and saw [no Saudi participation](#), is a testament to its importance in delivering a viable peace in Syria. At a recent conference in the Middle East, a senior Arab official divulged to me how the Saudi leadership feels overstretched in the region and entangled in Yemen, where they are increasingly dedicating the lion's share of their capabilities and resources. At the same time, the official told me, the Saudis feel their efforts in Syria have resulted in blowback, given that their preferred groups have [either](#) been overtaken or outright [coopted](#) by terrorist groups. As a result, Saudi Arabia did not go to the Astana talks, but the Syrian opposition High Negotiations Committee — [founded](#) in Saudi Arabia in 2016 — decided to lend its support to the anti-government military delegation going to Astana after debating the matter for [two days](#) in Riyadh.

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Attempting to increase distance between Iran and Russia will not only be a moot effort, but will also harm regional cooperation and prospects necessary to end the Syrian war.

Having Iran on board is crucial if any peace talks are to be successful. Russia is currently serving as the bridge between Iran and Turkey — which is de-facto [representing](#) Saudi and [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) interests — and is attempting to increase areas of commonality between the two countries. As Trump pursues [diplomacy](#) with Russia, it is critical that he recognize the importance of the Russian-Iranian relationship both in combatting terrorism and facilitating a political solution in Syria and elsewhere in the region. Attempting to increase distance between Iran and Russia will not only be a moot effort, but will also harm regional cooperation and prospects for the inclusive diplomacy necessary to end the Syrian war.



President Donald Trump speaks on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Oval Office of the White House, Jan. 28, 2017

It would be in the interests of the United States if Trump were to have a positive, win-win mentality in approaching Russia and Iran. While his current approach will almost certainly greatly worsen America's quagmires in the Middle East and make the threat of terrorism all the more difficult to effectively address, the potential exists for him to choose another path and score major achievements. If Trump elected a more diplomatic and inclusive foreign policy, he could simultaneously achieve four accomplishments: Improve ties with Russia, facilitate a resolution to the Syrian crisis, eradicate ISIS, and through Russian mediation, work to mend U.S.-Iran ties. If such a reality comes to pass, a truly effective coalition will emerge that can manage other regional crises as well.

On the other hand, if Trump tries to sabotage Russian-Turkish-Iranian dialogue, any hope he has in defeating ISIS and diminishing the terrorist threat in the Levant will be eliminated. Furthermore, Trump should know that Iran and Russia are neighbors, and that strong relations between them is a strategic imperative for both of them. Improving the U.S.-Russia relationship should not be envisioned as coming at the cost of Iran-Russia relations. First and foremost, it will simply not work, as it is far beyond the imagination of Russian policy makers that they can count on the United States as a stable, long-term partner in the same way they can of Iran. Secondly, in the region currently, Russia and Iran are bearing a [maximum](#) level of burden for keeping regional states intact, while the United States is bearing a minimum amount, a reality which binds them to each other. The region is on the verge of total collapse, and Russia, the U.S. and Iran should welcome collective cooperation to prevent all-encompassing chaos.

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If Trump adopts an inclusive, diplomatic foreign policy, he can achieve four things: Improve ties with Russia, facilitate a resolution to the Syrian crisis, eradicate ISIS and work to mend U.S.-Iran ties.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Middle East security and nuclear policy specialist at Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University and author of "Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace." He previously served as the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council from 1997 to 2005, and was spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the international community from 2003-2005.



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Andy Riveria · Denver, Colorado

I thought it was odd. No country has committed more troops to fighting ISIS nor lost more troops fighting ISIS then Iran.

O well I wont feel safe till Trump bans white Christian males from Canada.

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 31, 2017 8:16pm



Susan Lee

President Obama put into place a working strategy and allies that are defeating ISIS. Included in that coalition are Iraqi Shia paarties vehemently opposed to America. yet they were working with the USA.

All this is being put at risk. My prediction is that in 60 days Trump will come up with a plan that will destroy US standing and strategy in the region for at least a couple decades.

And leave ISIS secure.

Like · Reply · Feb 2, 2017 2:08pm



Mohammed Hussain · Coventry University

At least there will be no support from Europe if Trump attempts to start a war with Iran. Even Russia will oppose it. So only those peace loving Arabs and Israel will come to American assistance.

Like · Reply · Feb 1, 2017 4:14pm



Andrew B. Suhrer · Works at Novelist/Writer

Iranians don't get it, Trump and the GOP are going to start a war with Iran.

Like · Reply · Feb 1, 2017 2:16pm



Rom Pardi

You may be right.

Like · Reply · Feb 2, 2017 12:42pm



Susan Lee

They get it.

it is what they have been expecting all along. Fortunately all previous Administrations were smart enough to not meet that expectation.

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