

#COMMENTARY

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Commentary: A former Iranian diplomat on what Trump needs to know about Iran

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Iranian president Hassan Rouhani extends his hand to Iran's Judiciary chief Sadegh Larijani during a Tehran swearing-in ceremony for Rouhani's latest term, August 5, 2017. Nazanin Tabatabaee Yazdi/TIMA via REUTERS

With the fate of the Iran nuclear deal at stake, Donald Trump has until October 15 to tell Congress if he believes Tehran is complying with the seven-nation agreement.

Not all in the administration seem to agree with Trump's harder-line approach on Iran. Defense Secretary James Mattis has publicly [stated](#) that Trump "should consider staying" in the deal, while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has [reportedly](#) argued against decertification. Speaking after his first meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Tillerson also seemed to indicate a willingness to take a longer-term view when he [told a media conference](#) that the Washington-Tehran relationship had "never had a stable, happy moment in it." "Is this going to be the way it is for the rest of our lives and our children's lives and our grandchildren's lives," he asked.

Tillerson's remarks evoked an encounter told to me by Mohsen Rafiqdoost, a former Iranian Revolutionary Guards Commander, of a 1982 meeting he had with Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic.

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Rafiqdoost recalled suggesting that the U.S. embassy grounds in Tehran be converted to a Revolutionary Guards base. Ayatollah Khomeini rejected the idea, asking "Why would you go there? Are we not going to have relations with America for a thousand years?"

It's clear that decades of estrangement have led to a fundamental misunderstanding of Iran in Washington. Notwithstanding the Obama administration's nuclear negotiations, every U.S. administration since the 1979 Iranian revolution has failed in its declared objective to contain Iran.

If Trump wishes to free future generations of anxiety over U.S.-Iran tensions, he should pay careful attention to five points in formulating his Iran policy.

Shoppers at the Grand Bazaar in the center of Tehran, Iran, August 2, 2017. Nazanin Tabatabaee Yazdi/TIMA via REUTERS

First, American officials need to stop speaking about Iran in threatening and insulting terms. The Iranian people are proud of their thousands of years of history and above all else view mutual respect as integral to their foreign relations. However, Foreign Minister Zarif told me that Trump's speech to the United Nations General Assembly last month was the "most insulting speech of any American president toward Iran since the revolution" and that it "made any potential for dialogue with the United States meaningless."

Second, U.S. regime-change policies have been self-defeating. The principal reason for lasting Iranian distrust of the United States since the revolution has been U.S. policies aimed at undermining and overturning the Iranian political system. In June, Tillerson openly declared that U.S. policy towards Iran included regime change -- a statement not heard from a senior U.S. official in years and which marked a sharp departure from conventional U.S. rhetoric of seeking Iranian "behavior" change. 

was able to diplomatically engage Iran on its nuclear program, and reach the July 2015 nuclear deal. The respectful letters exchanged between Obama and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei helped set the process in motion. This would not happen today even if Trump made a similar overture, as the key to successful negotiations with Iran is to first drop regime-change policies.



Trump's Kim dilemma

Third, since the 1953 U.S.-led coup that overthrew democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, Iranians have resented U.S. interference in Iran. The political landscape of conservatives, moderates, and reformists in Iran is in many ways similar to the competition between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. As such, any agreement between Washington and Tehran must be negotiated in a way that transcends the partisan divide in each country -- or else it would be inherently fragile. The challenges the nuclear deal has been subject to in Washington by the Republican Party is testament to this need. With respect to Iran too, negotiations must be carried out in a way that respects Iran's political makeup and hierarchies.

Fourth, the Trump administration needs to accept that Iran, as a large country with immense natural resources and an educated population, has legitimate security concerns and interests in its neighborhood. Washington must recognize that U.S. policies aimed at isolating Tehran and refusing to accept a legitimate Iranian role in the region have only seen Iranian influence grow in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon while U.S. influence wanes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. From Iran's perspective, its post-1979 foreign policy has been driven by the aim of deterring foreign aggression and securing the country's borders rather than the pursuit of regional hegemony. After the revolution, Iran was invaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq and, for much of the past decade, chaos on its thousands of miles of

... compete for power, it must encourage the creation of a regional security system involving the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries along with Iraq and Iran.

Finally, the record of U.S.-Iran negotiations shows that “dual track” policies of pressure and diplomacy are destined to fail. While Trump appears to be trying to bring Iran to the negotiating table in a position of weakness, Iranian policymakers tend to respond to pressure by retaliating in kind.

In a recent Washington Post op-ed, former Secretary of State John Kerry highlighted how by the time he entered into negotiations with Iran, after years of sanctions, Iran had “mastered the nuclear fuel cycle” and built a uranium stockpile large enough to make 10 to 12 bombs. “In other words, Iran was already a nuclear-threshold state,” wrote Kerry.

The lesson for Washington here is that if push comes to shove, Tehran will develop its own bargaining chips --- not capitulate in the face of whatever threats are made when Trump delivers his next policy speech on Iran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#WORLD NEWS

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Iran promises 'crushing' response if U.S. designates Guards a terrorist group

FILE PHOTO: Members of the Iranian revolutionary guard march during a parade to commemorate the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), in Tehran September 22, 2011. REUTERS/Stringer/File Photo

LONDON (Reuters) - Iran promised on Monday to give a “crushing” response if the United States designated its elite Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist group.

The pledge came a week before President Donald Trump announces a final decision on how he wants to contain the Islamic Republic.

He is expected on Oct. 15 to “decertify” a landmark 2015 international deal to curb Iran’s nuclear program, a step that by itself stops short of pulling out of the agreement but gives Congress 60 days to decide whether to reimpose sanctions.

Iranian U.S. Strategy on Iran.

“We are hopeful that the United States does not make this strategic mistake,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qasemi was quoted as saying by the state news agency IRNA.

“If they do, Iran’s reaction would be firm, decisive and crushing and the United States should bear all its consequences,” he told a news conference reported by IRNA.

Individuals and entities associated with the IRGC are already on the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations, but the organization as a whole is not.

IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said on Sunday, “If the news is correct about the stupidity of the American government in considering the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group, then the Revolutionary Guards will consider the American army to be like Islamic State all around the world.”

Jafari also said that additional sanctions would end chances for future dialogue with the United States and that the Americans would have to move their regional bases outside the 2,000 km (1,250 mile) range of IRGC’s missiles.

WARY EUROPE

U.S. sanctions on the IRGC could affect conflicts in Iraq and Syria, where Tehran and Washington both support warring parties that oppose the Islamic State militant group (IS).

France said on Monday it was worried that classifying the IRGC as a terrorist group could exacerbate tensions in the region.

Germany said it was worried Trump would decide Iran is not respecting the nuclear deal, negotiated under his predecessor Barack Obama, and fears such a step will worsen insecurity in the Middle East.

for nuclear fuel in exchange for the lifting of sanctions that damaged its oil-based economy.

The U.N. nuclear watchdog's inspectors have repeatedly declared Iran in compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal.

Trump called Iran "a corrupt dictatorship" during his first speech to the U.N. General Assembly and said the nuclear deal was "the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into".

The other five world powers in the deal were Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China.

The prospect of the United States reneging on the agreement has worried other partners that helped negotiate it.

The Kremlin said that any U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal would have "negative consequences."

British Prime Minister Theresa May, who supports the nuclear pact, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposes it, agreed in a phone call on Monday that they need to be "clear-eyed" about the threat Iran poses to the Middle East.

"They agreed that ... the international community should continue working together to push back against Iran's destabilizing regional activity," May's spokesman said.

"MALIGN ACTIVITIES"

Despite the nuclear deal, Washington still maintains its own more limited sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missile program and over accusations Tehran supports terrorism.

Iran says it is developing missiles solely for defensive purposes and denies involvement in terrorism.

The U.S. government imposed sanctions in July on 18 entities and people for supporting the IRGC in developing drones and military equipment. In August, Congress overwhelmingly approved the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act” which imposed new sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missile program, as well as sanctions on Russia and North Korea.

In an interview aired on Saturday night, Trump accused Iran of “funding North Korea” and “doing things with North Korea that are totally inappropriate”.

Qasemi, Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman, said the U.S. accusations were “baseless”. He added, “Israel and some specific countries are raising these accusations to create Iranophobia.”

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