

A Dangerous Failure with Iran

President Obama's failure to sign off on a final nuclear agreement with Iran, which would have reined in but not eradicated its nuclear enrichment program, undercuts Iran's moderate President Rouhani and strengthens the hardliners who never trusted Obama and the U.S., as Ted Snider describes.

By Ted Snider

The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani choreographed Iranian foreign policy into a position of cooperation with America and the West. He made conciliatory comments toward Israel, and he created a climate that made serious nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China plus Germany) possible.

But as those negotiations have once again failed to reach a final agreement and with a more hawkish crowd coming into Congress hope for a deal that constrains but doesn't cancel Iran's nuclear program recedes further and further. The extension of the deadline until June looks more like a stay of execution.

Yet, this is not the first time that Iran has approached America and Europe with a willingness to cooperate only to see it rebuffed. In 1997, Iranians surprised the experts by electing the reformist Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to the presidency. Like Rouhani, Khatami wanted to smooth Iran's relations with the U.S. and the West.

Khatami began his overtures with a condemnation of terrorism and a declaration of Iran's willingness to accept a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine if that was the desired route of the Palestinians. With that declaration, Iran implicitly recognized the State of Israel because you can't accept a two-state solution without recognizing each of the states.

After 9/11, Khatami again signalled his desire to work with America by facilitating the Northern Alliance fight against the Taliban, by offering Iran's air bases for use against the Taliban, by giving the U.S. intelligence on Taliban and Al-Qa'ida targets and by apprehending hundreds of Taliban and Al-Qa'ida fighters who had fled into Iranian territory. Iran also helped set up a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan and offered its help in rebuilding the Afghan army.

In 2003, Khatami and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also approved a comprehensive nuclear proposal that would commit Iran to welcoming international inspectors, making its nuclear program entirely transparent, and signing the Additional

Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (in addition to having already signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty). President George W. Bush ignored the offer, refusing even to respond except by rhetorically tossing Iran into the Axis of Evil with its long-time enemy Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the isolated state of North Korea.

Khatami's overtures to and cooperation with America failed to bring about any improvement in relations. When Iranian leaders extended a hand of friendship, Bush brushed it away and marked them as a diabolical enemy.

Khatami was stunned and his hard-line adversaries pounced on his humiliation. The failure of his cooperative, reformist approach toward America and the West was seized upon by the hardliners as evidence that you cannot, in fact, ever negotiate a deal with the United States.

Khatami's failure contributed directly to the election of the much more conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005. Ahmadinejad would also take a tougher approach on nuclear negotiations and expand Iran's production of enriched uranium that brought threats of a military attack from Israeli leaders and hardliners in the United States.

So, the failure by the West to engage Iran when it offered a more reformist president as a partner and the failure to conclude a nuclear agreement when the opportunity was presented, led to a more difficult Iranian president and a more dangerous confrontation over the nuclear issue.

Rouhani, who took office in 2013, offered a second chance. Once again, a reformist president offered the West cooperation in its wars against terrorist groups, made conciliatory comments about Israel and created the conditions for serious negotiations on the nuclear issue.

Plus, this time, the offers of cooperation extended beyond Afghanistan into Iraq, and the conciliatory comments toward Israel took the form of explicitly recognizing and condemning the Holocaust. The nuclear negotiations offered real hope about placing tight limits on Iran's nuclear program to ensure that it would only be used for peaceful purposes.

But again the United States lacked the political will to capitalize on the opportunity, a failure that may have sunk the Obama administration's best hope for friendly relations with Iran while creating a political dynamic inside Iran that could strengthen the hardliners and doom the temporary limits placed on Iran's nuclear program.

There are at least four undesirable outcomes that could result: The first is that, in the absence of an agreement with Iran over uranium enrichment, Iran

will be free to return to the former full menu of civilian enrichment activities, from 3.5 percent for energy to 19.5 percent for medical isotopes, without international inspections, monitoring or accountability. That would put Iran much closer to the higher refinement of enriched uranium needed to produce a bomb.

The second unwelcome development would be the missed opportunity to cooperate with Iran in the significant areas where its interests overlap with the West's and over which the Iranians exert enormous influence, like Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and the region in general.

The third possibility is that if Iran gives up its hopes to reconcile with America and the West, it may turn east, the "look to the east option" articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei, to China, throwing the regionally powerful Iran into the arms of America's rival superpower: again, surely not the geopolitical outcome the U.S. was hoping for.

Whenever Iran's attempts to improve relations with America and the West fail, Iran works to forge closer ties with alternate powerful states and, especially, with China, according to former senior U.S. national security officials Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett.

The fourth outcome could be a repeat of the Khatami failure, giving the hardliners enhanced influence and power to the detriment of American foreign policy interests.

Based on Iran's past experience with Khatami's humiliation and a similar outcome from an earlier outreach by Khatami's predecessor, Hashemi Rafsanjani Iran's hardliners will have been vindicated again in their assessment that a posture of trust and cooperation toward the West is historically naive.

Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, said all along that while he supported Rouhani's efforts, he believed they "will have no benefit and will lead nowhere." If the P5+1 negotiations are not rescued from their current state of limbo, Iranian hardliners can wield the "we-told-you-so" club against the reformers and likely reclaim control of Iranian foreign policy.

As Iran expert Trita Parsi has said, "If diplomacy fails . . . , [Khamenei] will claim vindication. His mistrust of the West will have proven correct, as will his line that Iran's interest is best served by resisting rather than collaborating with the West. Iran's moderates and pragmatists will once again be pushed to the margins of Iranian politics. Rouhani will be weakened and momentum will shift back to . . . the hardliners."

Iranian hardliners will once again accuse the West of negotiating in a manner

that sets conditions that are impossible to accept. Rouhani has recently said that, if a deal is ever to be reached, the United States will have “to stop making excessive demands,” adding: “Iran has made its utmost efforts and made the necessary adjustments to its demands and we hope that all the P5+1 countries, particularly the U.S., which occasionally seeks excessive demands in the nuclear talks, will understand the circumstances.”

If the hardliners do take control of Iranian foreign policy, negotiating a nuclear agreement outside of the context of a more comprehensive agreement may again prove much more difficult, as it did after Khatami’s failure. It could also lead to an unmonitored nuclear Iran, which could be followed by an escalation of Israeli hostility including a possible military strike and by a stronger Iranian relationship with China.

So, failure to seize upon the historical opportunity provided by Rouhani could win America precisely the set of results it says it wants to avoid.

Ted Snider has a graduate degree in philosophy and writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history.

The Price for Criticizing Israel

Part of the neocon grip on Official Washington comes from the harsh career damage inflicted on people who criticize Israel’s abuse of the Palestinians, with such critics deemed anti-Semitic and thus often denied work or a place to express their opinions, as Lawrence Davidson notes.

By Lawrence Davidson

Of late there has been news about attacks on academic freedom, much of it the result of aggressive efforts by Zionist organizations and individuals to silence those academics they see as enemies of Israel.

The latest example of this is the successful pressure brought to bear, apparently by a Zionist donor, on the chancellor of the University of Illinois to rescind a job offer for Professor Steven Salaita. This was done because this influential donor, noting Salaita’s anti-Israel tweets, decided he was anti-Semitic. The Chancellor was apparently convinced that hiring Salaita would cost the university a lot of support – a pretty clear example of donor blackmail.

The Salaita case is not the only recent attempt to intimidate academics critical of Israel. An organization calling itself AMCHA (“your people” in Hebrew) and

purporting to work for the “protection of Jewish students” has posted a list of over 200 professors who support the boycott of Israel. They too have been judged anti-Semitic and Jewish students are urged by the organization to avoid their classes.

These attacks are tied to a long-standing and growing movement in American higher education to confront Israeli persecution of Palestinians particularly as regards the Occupied Territories – to point out the barbaric nature of the Israeli/Zionist state, *not because it is Jewish, but because it is deeply racist.*

However, because the leaders and many of the supporters of Israel are Jewish, they confuse the issue and claim a stance against Israel must be one against Jews per se and that is anti-Semitism. It is a claim that makes little sense if only due to the fact that many of those opposing Israeli actions, both within and without of academia, are Jewish.

The Back Story

This attack on academics who see things differently than the Zionists is not new. In 2007, David Horowitz organized teach-ins on campuses across the nation during which professors critical of Israel were accused of purposely withholding information about the threat of “Islamofascism.”

Horowitz also asserted that many of these same “left-wing” professors had taken over the country’s universities and were systematically harassing conservative students. Through his influence, 17 state legislatures ordered investigations of these charges. Later he would publish a book entitled *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. All were critics of Israel. This set the precedent for the recent listing put forth by AMCHA.

Horowitz was acting in coordination with Daniel Pipes. In 2002, Pipes founded Campus Watch, a website on which he posted the names of academics, mostly in the field of Middle East studies, whom he accused of being “apologists for suicide bombing and militant Islam.” Pipes encouraged students who supported Israel to “hover over the shoulders” of such professors and let them know they were being monitored.

There are many other examples of attacks on academic freedom, and as a consequence Professor Salaita’s career is by no means the only one to be harmed by this sort activity. Dozens of faculty at all levels of higher education have suffered threats, harassment, discipline and/or termination.

These range from well-known figures such as Edward Said at Columbia University and Juan Cole in his dealings with Yale University, to perhaps less-known, but still important teachers and scholars such as Terri Ginsberg at North Carolina State University and the horribly persecuted Sami al-Arian at the University of South Florida.

Larger Historical Context

And then there is the larger historical context for all this. In terms of U.S. history the suppression of free speech, academic or otherwise, can be traced back to 1798 and the Alien and Sedition Acts. Suppression reappeared in the 1830s under Andrew Jackson and during the Civil War under Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson used the Espionage Act to jail vocal opponents of the First World War beginning in 1917, and this was followed by the first Red Scare in the early 1920s. McCarthyism appeared in 1950s. The intimidating finger-pointing of Islamophobia appeared even before the tragedies of 2001.

What does all this history, stretching from the very beginning of the nation until the present day, tell us? It demonstrates that the effort to control dissenting speech has always been present and probably always will be. There are a number of factors that support this sober conclusion:

First, there is the fact that most people have short historical memories. On average, the United States experiences significant attacks on dissenters and their right to free speech once every 30 to 40 years. This suggests that most citizens have forgotten the essentially barbaric nature and consequences of the previous episode and how, in the end, the claims and charges that ruined so many lives turned out to be false or greatly exaggerated.

Second, there is the difficulty of thinking critically about events of which we have little knowledge. When confronted with such a situation, most citizens rely on the government and its allied media to provide them supposedly accurate information. These sources may well slant stories in a certain way so as to produce public support for specific policies.

The consequences of such distortions are particularly noticeable when it comes to foreign events. Thus, the effectiveness of the ongoing attack on academic freedom, and specifically the freedom of those who are critical of Israel and U.S. policies in the Middle East, is directly related to the ignorance of most Americans about the persecution of Palestinians and the Muslim world's perception of U.S. behavior.

Third, there is the majority's ignorance of or indifference to the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights is the result of a strong demand that the original

U.S. Constitution be amended so that it enumerates the basic rights – including freedom of speech – of citizens, residents and visitors on American soil.

However, who is it that usually exercises their rights in ways that might need such protection? It is not the mainstream majority, but rather a vocal minority usually disapproved of by the mainstream. This disregard of the importance of the Bill of Rights is all the more dangerous because those who seek to suppress free expression almost always claim to be acting in defense of the majority.

Such is the power of this claim that often the courts, the job of which entails the enforcement of the Bill of Rights, end up sanctioning its violation.

It is clear that there is a recurring pattern to the assaults on free speech. Perhaps the pattern has its roots in a community's natural preference for group solidarity. Whatever the origins, the pattern of periodic negative reactions is so well established that we can justifiably conclude it is not going to go away. We are historically stuck with it.

The only way to minimize the consequences of these repeated assaults is to continuously defy them. In other words, only by maintaining a counter-pattern of vigorously defending and using the right of free speech and academic freedom can space be sustained for critical voices.

If at any time we fail to sustain this space we risk the possibility of being overwhelmed by a combination of closed-minded ideologues and the mass indifference of the majority.

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The Risk of Misreading Russia's Intent

Official Washington's "group think" on Ukraine holds that the crisis is all about Russian "aggression" and "expansionism" even with comparisons to Hitler. But such a hyperbolic interpretation of intent can create its own dangerous dynamics, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Much of the discourse over the past year about responding to Russian moves in

Ukraine has been couched in terms of the need to stop aggressive expansionism in its tracks. Hillary Clinton has even invoked the old familiar analogy to Nazi expansionism in likening some of the Russian actions to what Germany was doing in the 1930s.

With or without the Nazi analogy, a commonly expressed concept is that not acting firmly enough to stop Russian expansionism in Ukraine would invite still further expansion.

Underlying such arguments are certain assumptions about wider Russian intentions. If Vladimir Putin and anyone else advising him on policy toward Ukraine see their moves there as steps in a larger expansionist strategy, then the concept of stopping the expansion in its tracks is probably valid. But if Russian objectives are instead focused on narrower goals and especially concerns more specific to Ukraine, the concept can be more damaging than useful.

As long as historical comparisons are being invoked, one possibly instructive comparison is with an earlier episode involving application of military force by Russia or the Soviet Union along its periphery. This episode provides a closer correspondence than pre-war Nazi maneuvers, but it is still distant enough to provide some perspective and a sense of the consequences. It is the Soviet armed intervention in Afghanistan, which occurred 35 years ago as of this December.

Once Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, a key question for policy-makers in Jimmy Carter's administration was the Soviets' purpose in undertaking the operation. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance would later summarize in his memoirs two competing answers to that question. One view was that Moscow's motives were primarily local and, insofar as they extended beyond Afghanistan, focused on worries about possible unrest among Muslims in the Central Asian republics of the USSR.

The other view was that the Soviets had concluded that the relationship with the United States had already deteriorated so much that they should seize the opportunity not only to quell their Afghan problem but to improve their larger strategic position in South and Southwest Asia, moving ever closer to those proverbial warm water ports that have traditionally been a goal of Russian strategists.

The different interpretations had significantly different policy interpretations. An appropriate response to the latter, more expansive, Soviet strategy would be to slow the Soviet advance by making Afghanistan even more unstable than it already was, particularly through assistance to the mujahedeen insurgents.

But if the first interpretation were correct, stoking the insurgency would only prolong the Red Army's stay, put more nails in the coffin of U.S.-Soviet détente, and perhaps lead the Soviets to make other moves that would start to turn a Soviet threat to Pakistan from a fear into a reality.

It was the expansionist interpretation of Soviet objectives that implicitly became the basis for the Carter administration's policies. It became so without any thorough analysis by the policy-makers of Moscow's motives. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser whose thinking became the chief basis for the Carter administration's policy toward the USSR, did not even think such analysis was necessary. He later wrote that "the issue was not what might have been Brezhnev's subjective motives in going into Afghanistan but the objective consequences of a Soviet military presence so much closer to the Persian Gulf."

Thus ensued a U.S. response that included a broad array of sanctions, withdrawal from the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980, enunciation of the bellicose-sounding Carter Doctrine about willingness to use force in the Persian Gulf region, and most consequentially, increased material aid to the Afghan insurgents.

Despite the significant differences between that situation and what the West faces today in Ukraine, there are some applicable lessons. One is the importance of careful consideration of Russian objectives, rather than just making worst-case assumptions. Another lesson is the need for humility in realizing that our initial thoughts about those objectives may be wrong.

The Carter administration's thoughts and assumptions about that may have been wrong. With the benefit of hindsight, a good case can be made today that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was not intended to score strategic gains by moving closer to oil and sea lanes but instead was about avoiding a substantial loss for the Soviets: the overthrow of an existing Communist government in a country bordering the USSR by an insurgency that could lead to trouble among Central Asian residents of the USSR itself.

Another lesson is to be wary of how domestic U.S. politics may push decision-makers in unhelpful directions. A major pusher of Carter's policies was his political need to get tough, or to be seen getting tough, with the Soviets. When Carter had said in a televised interview shortly after the Soviet intervention that the intervention had helped to educate him about Soviet goals, his political opponents jumped all over this comment as supposedly a sign of naiveté. Carter's political weakness at the time also stemmed from the near-simultaneous crisis that had begun a few weeks earlier with the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

The constant hammering away by Barack Obama's political opponents of the theme

that Mr. Obama supposedly has been too weak and insufficiently assertive against U.S. adversaries offers an obvious parallel regarding the potential for political considerations pushing policy into unhelpful directions.

Finally there is the importance of taking fully into account all the consequences, including longer range and more indirect consequences, of how the United States responds to Russian moves. A full balance sheet on the results of U.S. aid to the Afghan insurgency would be complicated and subject to argument, but a major downside has been contribution to varieties of militant Islamism that for most of the past 35 years have been more of a worry for the United States, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, than anything the Russians have been doing.

Some of the violent elements that are principal adversaries in Afghanistan today are descendants of elements that received U.S. aid in the 1980s. The Afghan insurgency against the Soviets also continues to be a major influence, as an inspiration and in other respects, helping to sustain transnational Islamist terrorism.

No one has a monopoly of wisdom on what exactly are Russian goals in and around Ukraine today. Maybe even Vladimir Putin does not fully know what those goals will be, and is in large part reacting to moves by Ukrainians and by the West. Applying the framework of what the Carter administration faced in Afghanistan, however, it is reasonable to characterize the objectives as more local than expansive in a larger geopolitical sense.

The most explicitly expansionist thing Putin has done, the annexation of Crimea, can be seen as a one-off given the unusual historical, demographic, and emotional circumstances associated with the peninsula. Much of the rest of Russian policy has to do with the specter of NATO's expansion into Ukraine. Unfortunately Ukrainian President Poroshenko does not seem inclined to give that issue a rest.

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