

Hyping the Iranian 'Threat'

Iran hasn't invaded another country for centuries and is helping the U.S. push back against the Islamic State in Iraq, but Israeli leaders and American neocons want to enlist the West in the Saudi cause of promoting Sunni Islam over Shiite Islam, while America's interests suffer, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The idea of Iran as a regional marauder that is gobbling up other countries in the Middle East and against which pressure must therefore be unrelenting has become one of the favorite themes of those determined to kill the nuclear agreement with Tehran. As an argument for rejecting the nuclear deal, this approach has always suffered from major factual and logical flaws.

Given the casual and automatic manner in which references to Iran supposedly sowing mayhem all over the region are routinely worked into almost any discussion of policy toward Iran, it perhaps is too much to expect many people to stop and study the flaws. Perhaps we should just remind people who make those casual references that if Iran really were bent on causing all that mayhem, that is all the more reason to support an agreement to assure that the marauder does not get a nuclear weapon.

But let's not abandon facts and logic just yet. The main fact on this subject is that Iran hasn't been doing anything close to the country-gobbling, capital-controlling, instability-creating stuff in the Middle East that it routinely gets accused of doing. Its regional activity is best characterized as the understandable and unsurprising reactions of a major regional state to an assortment of conflicts in its neighborhood that are not of its own making.

As Jon Alterman has put it, "The reality is the Iranians don't control any Arab capital, and they couldn't if they tried. Iraqis have a strong sense of nationalism and self-interest, as do Syrians, Lebanese and Yemenis. If you were an Iranian trying to impose your will, you'd be tearing your hair out. There is no Iranian 'order' in the region." Instead, there is a lot of disorder, and amid that disorder the Iranian goal, says Alterman, "is to survive in a hostile world."

There is no fundamental difference between most of what Iran actually is doing in the region and what either the United States or its regional Sunni friends are doing in reacting to the same disorder. Yet when the latter step into something like the confusing sectarian/tribal/personal conflict in Yemen, as the Saudis have done with their U.S.-supported military intervention replete with

airstrikes, it is looked on benignly, but when the Iranians provide lesser assistance to one of the players in the same conflict, this gets described as country-gobbling trouble-making. Such inconsistency is all the more glaring when Iran and the United States are weighing in on the same side, as they are in Iraq.

A particular variant of the Iran-as-marauder argument that has featured prominently in the most recent efforts to kill the nuclear agreement is the notion that granting Iran relief from some of the sanctions to which it currently is subjected would give Iran more resources for more trouble-making in the region, and this would mean Iran would in fact cause more trouble.

This assumes that any extra funds in the Iranian bank account would go into whatever foreign activities the anti-agreement people want us to think of as trouble-making, rather than toward meeting the demands and high expectations of the Iranian public for domestic improvement.

That assumption does not square with what Iranian leaders know their political future depends upon; they fully realize that the crowds that greeted Foreign Minister Javad Zarif upon returning from the negotiations in Lausanne expect that improvement in their way of life at home; people in the crowds were not cheering Zarif because they believe there will be more money for foreign adventurism.

The assumption also does not square, as Juan Cole points out, with the actual record of how the Iranians have apportioned their resources. And the assumption that Iranian regional activities will be a function of the balance in Iran's bank account is certainly inconsistent with the image of Iranian leaders as ideologically-driven hotheads who are out to inflame and destabilize whatever they can.

In fact, the assumed connection between sanctions relief and greater regional activism makes the Iranians look much more like cool-headed green eyeshade types than are the Americans who promoted the biggest destabilizing, country-breaking, terrorism-stimulating event in the Middle East in recent times: a war that turned out to cost trillions.

Note a further inconsistency in what the deal-killers are saying. Many of the same people (the Israeli prime minister is a prominent but by no means the only example) who are saying that Iran should not be given sanctions relief lest the Iranians have more resources for regional trouble-making are also contending that continued pressure through sanctions is the way to get a "better deal" on the nuclear issue.

Even if either of these contentions were valid (and neither one is), they could not possibly both be valid. The sanctions from which Iran will get relief were enacted for the clearly expressed purpose of inducing concessions from Iran on the nuclear issue. With the framework agreement that was announced last week, that purpose has been achieved.

But opponents of the deal are suggesting that the United States should now say, "Well, that's not really what we had in mind for those sanctions. We're going to keep them in place indefinitely because we don't want to give you resources for doing other things."

How is that supposed to give the Iranians incentive to cooperate on anything, and specifically on nuclear matters? And for those who whine a lot about damage to U.S. credibility (many of those opposing the nuclear deal are among the principal habitual whiners), how will this switcharoo affect how other nations view U.S. credibility, and how much they will believe the United States the next time it tries to use a tool such as economic sanctions to persuade someone to change a policy?

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
