

Inventing a Record of Iranian Aggression

Following the lead of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Official Washington's neocons are hyping Iran's record as an aggressor state, with some examples harkening back to the Sixteenth Century and other more recent cases simply not true, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Opponents of the nuclear agreement (really, of any agreement) with Iran continue, in an effort to divert attention from the relative advantages of having – versus not having – negotiated restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, to present an image of Iran as a ruthless and relentless imperialist intent on gaining control of the entire Middle East.

Iran is repeatedly portrayed as being “on the march” toward regional domination or as “gobbling up” other countries. It never gets explained how this picture, even if it were true, would constitute a reason to complete a nuclear agreement to ensure that this supposedly relentless imperialist power never gets the most powerful weapon mankind has ever invented. But logic is not what is being exercised here; instead it is more of an emotion-based effort to foster distaste for doing any business with such an ogre-like regime.

An additional twist to this line of anti-agreement agitation is found in [an opinion piece](#) by Soner Cagaptay, James Jeffrey and Mehdi Khalaji, all of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The WINEP authors state that Iran is “a revolutionary power with hegemonic aspirations” and liken it to “hegemonic powers in the past”: Russia, France, Germany, Japan and Britain, powers that “pushed the world into war” in 1914 and 1939.

Let us recall what those hegemonic powers did. The Russians used their armies to build an empire that encompassed much of the Eurasian land mass and whose successor state still spans eleven time zones. Britain dominated the oceans with the Royal Navy and used its power to build an empire on which the sun never set. France also captured and colonized vast parts of Africa and Asia and, when it had an emperor with sufficient talent, overran most of Europe as well. Japan used military force to seize control of huge parts of the eastern hemisphere.

And as for Germany, the WINEP authors themselves, as part of the near-obligatory reference to Nazis in any anti-agreement writing about Iran, remind us that “Nazi Germany sought to dominate Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Volga River, reducing other countries to vassal states and establishing complete military, economic and diplomatic control.” Actually, it didn't just seek to do that; Nazi Germany used its preeminent military power to accomplish that

objective, at least for a while.

Iran represents nothing that comes even remotely close to any of this, as a matter of accomplishment, capability or aspiration. Certainly the current Islamic Republic of Iran does not come close, and one would have to reach far back into Persian history to start to get a taste of imperialism even at the reduced scale of the Persians' immediate neighborhood.

The twist of the WINEP piece is that the authors reach back in exactly that way. They tell us that "Iran's hegemonic aspirations actually date back to the Safavid Dynasty of the 16th century." You know that there is a lot of argumentative stretching going on when references to Safavids in the Sixteen Century are used as a basis for opposing an agreement with someone else about a nuclear program in the Twenty-first Century.

The Safavid Dynasty faded out before anyone could judge what would have been its willingness to behave as a respectable member of the modern state system. Those other hegemonic powers named in the piece evolved into respectable members of the current international order (although debate related to the Ukraine crisis continues about the attitudes of the Russian government).

So the WINEP authors, in trying to argue that Iran never could become a respectable, well-behaving member of the same order, contend that what sets Iran apart is not only that it has hegemonic aspirations but that it is "a revolutionary power with hegemonic aspirations."

And, they say, "Revolutionary hegemonic powers combine the imperialist lust for 'lebensraum' seen in Wilhelmine Germany", gotta get in those comparisons to the Nazis, "with a religious or millennial worldview that rejects the principles of the classic international order."

How far divorced from reality this line of argument is emerges from the authors' reference to yet another power whose strengths and ambitions are way out of Iran's league: China, which the authors want us to see as hegemonic but not revolutionary like Iran. They write, "Even today, countries with hegemonic tendencies, like China, acknowledge the legitimacy of this international order."

That is a remarkable statement in view of how much China's international behavior can be explained, and has been explained by innumerable analysts, in terms of China's *rejection* of aspects of the international order that were established by the West without Chinese participation. A recent example of this aspect of Chinese policy involves the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and other Chinese-created mechanisms as alternatives to Western-dominated international financial institutions.

In contrast, a major feature of the supposedly “revolutionary” Iranian regime’s foreign policy has been to try to integrate Iran into as much of the existing international order as possible, notwithstanding its Western origins. (Iran, unlike China, does not have anywhere near the strength to erect alternatives to Western institutions even if it wanted to.)

This strand of Iranian policy is reflected not only in what Iranian leaders say but also in what they do, such as participation in this week’s Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference. The nuclear agreement currently being negotiated with the P5+1 is itself one of the clearest manifestations of the Iranian policy of making significant concessions and sacrifices in the interest of becoming a more integrated member of the international community.

The depiction of current-day Iran as “revolutionary” in the sense of upsetting the international apple cart requires as much ignoring of recent history and actual patterns of Iranian behavior as does the likening of current Iran to Sixteenth Century Safavid imperialism.

In the early years of the Islamic Republic there was indeed a belief among many in Tehran that their own revolution might not survive without like-minded revolutions elsewhere in the neighborhood. But with the Islamic Republic having now survived for more than three decades, that perspective is obsolete.

A good case in point is Bahrain, given its Shia majority population and historical Iranian claims. Despite the unrest there in recent years, it has been a long time since any reliable reports of Iranian activity there that could honestly be described as subversive or revolutionary. In stark contrast to whatever minimal Iranian involvement there is in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia rolled its armed forces across the causeway to forcibly put down Shia unrest and prop up the Sunni regime in Manama.

A similar contrast prevails today in Yemen, where any Iranian aid to the Houthis, whose rebellion was not instigated by Iran (and during which the Iranians reportedly have counseled restraint to the Houthis) is dwarfed by the Saudi airstrikes that have killed hundreds of civilians. (Tell us again, which Persian Gulf country is the hegemonic power?)

Stories of Iran as a supposedly threatening regional hegemon are not only not a reason to oppose reaching agreements with Tehran; the stories aren’t even true.

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How Discrimination Breeds Radicalism

The radicalization of young Muslims has similarities to anger among other disaffected groups frustrated over the lack of economic and other opportunities. This problem is especially acute in European nations without much history of immigration and assimilation, says Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

One of the most troubling developments resulting from the escalation of violent extremism in the Middle East is the rise in the number of Muslims from the West who are joining the ranks of jihadist groups, notably ISIS.

Western governments are struggling to find out what motivates young Muslims to leave their sheltered lives, many are well-to-do and educated, only to join radical organizations that offer an elusive goal and the prospect of violent death.

It appears that the determining factor behind this phenomenon is the absence of integration, by choice or design, of young Muslims into the mainstream of their respective Western countries. For this reason, integration must be the engine that propels deradicalization, and of necessity it takes a whole range of socio-economic, religious and political measures to mitigate the vulnerabilities in these areas that young Muslims experience.

The rise of violent extremism is only at the early stages, and if the West wants to stem the flow of volunteers to these ruthless groups, Western countries should make a concerted effort to engage and understand the nuances of their Muslim communities, especially the families from which these volunteers are coming.

Unlike assimilation, where an individual stands to lose his identity by absorption into the mainstream culture, integration involves a mutual recognition and respect of the other, a harmonization that includes difference rather than denies it.

Lewis Mumford put it best when he stated that: "Integration proceeds by a deliberate heightening of every organic function; a release of impulses from circumstances that irrationally thwarted them; richer and more complex patterns of activity; an esthetic heightening of anticipated realizations; a steady lengthening of the future; a faith in cosmic perspectives."

The psychological dimension of violent extremism needs to be understood as there is no one single root cause or path that leads to the mental and emotional conditioning that transforms young Muslims from being ordinary peaceful individuals to violently radical.

The threat emanating today from ISIS, al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups is inspired by religious teachings, distorted under the guise of defending purist Sunni Islam, which ultimately aim to infect susceptible Muslim youths to whom religion provides an escape and a sense of belonging.

Violent extremists wage a war on Western cultural and religious precepts and wish to see their acts fused into the identity of their own Muslim community so they can be recognized as being representative of the larger community, especially by the media.

Many of the young men and women who live in Western countries feel increasingly marginalized economically, socially and politically, and are particularly vulnerable as they are often in transitional stages in their lives, whether as immigrants, students in search of friends, job seekers, etc.

On the whole, they are in need of an outlet to vent their frustration, and consequently, they become easy prey for extremists seeking new recruits in mosques and online. There is, however, a common denominator behind most of the causes that radicalize Muslim youth, which is the lack of integration into their new social milieu, caused by:

–Disinterest in being integrated, as many young Muslims are living in a bubble where they feel comfortable and secure and are not encouraged to step out beyond their immediate circle of peers and family. This is further compounded in situations where extremism runs deep in a particular family, or where they have certain gripes against the socio-political milieu in which they live.

–No deliberate effort by governments to integrate Muslim youth into general society, a condition further aggravated by entrenched prejudices in most West European societies, such as Britain and France. Citizens of foreign descent in these states are often identified and remain as “foreigners,” regardless of how long they have been living in their adopted countries, even if they are second or third generation citizens.

–The growing pervasiveness of Islamophobia among Europeans, precipitated by the rise of violent extremists of all colorations and the seemingly endless bloodshed between Muslim communities and against Westerners, which has produced a conscious and unconscious repudiation of anything related to Muslims in general.

–A deeper, growing sense of alienation, which is the antithesis to inclusiveness, leading young Muslims in particular to find ways to resist and defy rather than seek new opportunities to integrate and become loyal nationals of their adopted countries.

Interestingly enough, the number of young American Muslims joining violent extremist groups remains proportionately considerably less than the number of British and French Muslims joining ISIS. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that the U.S. is essentially a country of immigrants, and having foreign roots is part of American culture.

Therefore, the incorporation of foreigners into the main social stream, with some exception, is left up to the individual and is generally constrained only by the person's qualifications and ambitions. West European Muslims in particular seek to maintain their identity and can do so through integration, where their identity as a Muslim is not lost, rather than assimilation.

If West European countries are to subscribe to Mumford's notion of integration, they must develop a comprehensive strategy that would prevent young disenfranchised Muslims from being lured to join the ranks of violent extremists.

Before these countries can develop such a strategy, they must avoid generalizations (for example, that Islam is inherently violent), understand why young Muslims and converts are joining, and why many of them come back. Only then should governments take specific steps to ensure that those who joined and return are de-radicalized and become useful citizens who can dissuade others from following their path.

There are no quick fixes for this alarming development, and no amount of law enforcement and coercion will halt the flow of volunteers of West European Muslims to join the ranks of violent extremists other than inclusion.

To successfully counter violent extremism, West European countries, together with Muslim leaders and educators in their respective communities, must investigate who is embracing radical views through field studies, raise awareness and analyze the real root causes in different Muslim communities, which was and still is missing.

This approach would enable them to present credible counter-arguments with candid, transparent, and open-ended dialogue that could change the socio-economic and political dynamics to create a new atmosphere that would single out young Muslims in a positive light. To that end, West European governments must:

–Adopt a new public narrative by using a strategic way to communicate utilizing

every conceivable media outlet to counter extremists with facts, avoid moral preaching and address the perception of Western nations assailing Muslims, which leads the young to seek justice through violence;

–Develop community service programs to introduce young Muslims to the larger community of their Western peers and begin a process of integration in which they develop personal interests to fill the social, economic, and political emptiness they feel; –Invite credible and respected voices from the Muslim world to discredit the messages of the extremists, that there is no path to glory in death, that joining such violent groups only reinforces the vicious cycle of death and destruction, and that there is no martyrdom in their senseless self-sacrifices;

–Encourage young Muslims to join sport activities and provide opportunities to show off their talent and ability to excel, while supporting those who seek to establish their social identity and be recognized; –Prevent prisons from becoming incubators for new terrorists by rehabilitating prisoners through community programs, schooling, professional enhancements, and assigning of responsibility within the prison's setting; nearly 80 percent of prisoners who went through such rigorous programs in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen ended up being completely rehabilitated and became role models for other prisoners to emulate;

–Foster the desire of young Muslims to participate in local political discussion groups, be involved in the decision-making process from the bottom up, and be part of any positive changes to advance the interests of their communities and enhance their self-esteem;

–Develop international exchange programs to expose young Muslims to what is happening in other communities, areas of social and economic progress, and new innovations and ideas that can be duplicated to benefit their own families and communities;

–Finally, all of these programs require a commitment for long-term funding. No country directly or indirectly affected by violent extremism can afford to be long on talking and short on funding. They must provide the financial and human resources to meet this unprecedented challenge, regardless of how costly and how long it might take.

Given that the violent turmoil sweeping the Middle East, especially the Sunni-Shia conflict and the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, is unlikely to settle any time soon, a growing number of young Muslims will join the ranks of extremists posing an ever-greater national security menace for Western countries.

For this reason, we must distinguish between what's possible and what's impossible to achieve, and what might become more probable if circumstances change. Western governments must develop a long-term de-radicalization strategy to stem the flow of Muslim volunteers with the objective of substantially reducing the threat they pose upon their return to their respective countries.

There is no shortcut and no other means by which to de-radicalize young Muslims other than by taking the measures outlined above, and approaches tailored to specific communities. Failure is not an option as the consequences will be extraordinarily dire. A state of constant alarm, emergencies, and terrorism will become a way of life, haunting Western democracies and violently destabilizing the Middle East for decades to come.

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Double Standards and Drones

American politicians and pundits genuflect to the theory of exceptionalism, which holds that the U.S. can do pretty much whatever it wants, but this lawlessness best exemplified by drones raining down death on "terrorists" and civilians alike makes more enemies than it kills, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

President Barack Obama stood behind the podium and apologized for inadvertently killing two Western hostages – including one American – during a drone strike in Pakistan. Obama said, "one of the things that sets America apart from many other nations, one of the things that makes us exceptional, is our willingness to confront squarely our imperfections and to learn from our mistakes."

In his 2015 State of the Union address, Obama described America as "exceptional." When he spoke to the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, he said, "Some may disagree, but I believe that America is exceptional."

American exceptionalism reflects the belief that Americans are somehow better than everyone else. This view reared its head after the 2013 leak of a Justice Department white paper that describes circumstances under which the President can order the targeted killing of U.S. citizens. There had been little public concern in this country about drone strikes that killed people in other

countries. But when it was revealed that U.S. citizens could be targeted, Americans were outraged. This motivated Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, to launch his 13-hour filibuster of John Brennan's nomination for CIA director.

It is this double standard that moved Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu to write a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, in which he asked, "Do the United States and its people really want to tell those of us who live in the rest of the world that our lives are not of the same value as yours?" (When I saw that letter, I immediately invited Archbishop Tutu to write the foreword to my book, *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*. He graciously agreed and he elaborates on that sentiment in the foreword.)

Obama insists that the CIA and the U.S. military are very careful to avoid civilian casualties. In May 2013, he declared in a speech at the National Defense University, "before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured the highest standard we can set."

Nevertheless, of the nearly 3,852 people killed by drone strikes, 476 have reportedly been civilians. The Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), which examined nine drone strikes in Yemen, concluded that civilians were killed in every one. Amrit Singh, a senior legal officer at OSJI and primary author of the report, said "We've found evidence that President Obama's standard is not being met on the ground."

In 2013, the administration released a fact sheet with an additional requirement that "capture is not feasible" before a targeted killing can be carried out. Yet the OSJI also questioned whether this rule is being followed. Suspected terrorist Mohanad Mahmoud Al Farekh, a U.S. citizen, was on the Pentagon's "kill list" but he was ultimately arrested by Pakistani security forces and will be tried in a U.S. federal court.

"This is an example that capturing can be done," according to Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The fact sheet also specifies that in order to use lethal force, the target must pose a "continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons." But the leaked Justice Department white paper says that a U.S. citizen can be killed even when there is no "clear evidence that a specific attack on U.S. persons and interests will take place in the immediate future."

This renders the imminency requirement a nullity. Moreover, if there is such a low bar for targeting a citizen, query whether there is any bar at all for killing foreigners.

There must also be “near certainty” that the terrorist target is present. Yet the CIA did not even know who it was slaying when the two hostages were killed. This was a “signature strike” that targets “suspicious compounds” in areas controlled by “militants.”

Zenko says, “most individuals killed are not on a kill list, and the [U.S.] government does not know their names.” So how can one determine with any certainty that a target is present when the CIA is not even targeting individuals?

Contrary to popular opinion, the use of drones does not result in fewer civilian casualties than manned bombers. A study based on classified military data, conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses and the Center for Civilians in Conflict, concluded that the use of drones in Afghanistan caused 10 times more civilian deaths than manned fighter aircraft.

Moreover, a panel with experienced specialists from both the George W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations issued a 77-page report for the Stimson Center, a nonpartisan think tank, which found there was no indication that drone strikes had advanced “long-term U.S. security interests.”

Nevertheless, the Obama administration maintains a double standard for apologies to the families of drone victims. “The White House is setting a dangerous precedent that if you are western and hit by accident we’ll say we are sorry,” said Reprieve attorney Alka Pradhan, “but we’ll put up a stone wall of silence if you are a Yemeni or Pakistani civilian who lost an innocent loved one. Inconsistencies like this are seen around the world as hypocritical, and do the United States’ image real harm.”

It is not just the U.S. image that is suffering. Drone strikes create more enemies of the United States. While Faisal Shahzad was pleading guilty to trying to detonate a bomb in Times Square, he told the judge, “When the drones hit, they don’t see children.”

Americans are justifiably outraged when we hear about ISIS beheading western journalists. Former CIA lawyer Vicki Divoll, who now teaches at the U.S. Naval Academy, told the *New Yorker’s* Jane Mayer in 2009, “People are a lot more comfortable with a Predator [drone] strike that kills many people than with a throat-slitting that kills one.” But Americans don’t see the images of the drone victims or hear the stories of their survivors. If we did, we might be more sympathetic to the damage our drone bombs are wreaking in our name.

Drone strikes are illegal when conducted off the battlefield. They should be outlawed. Obama, like Bush before him, opportunistically defines the whole world

as a battlefield.

The guarantee of due process in the U.S. Constitution as well as in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights must be honored, not just in its breach. That means arrest and fair trial, not summary execution.

What we really need is a complete reassessment of Obama's continuation of Bush's "war on terror." Until we overhaul our foreign policy and stop invading other countries, changing their regimes, occupying, torturing and indefinitely detaining their people, and uncritically supporting other countries that illegally occupy other peoples' lands, we will never be safe from terrorism.

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