

Erasing Obama's Iran Success

The nihilism of modern American politics extends globally with one side seeking to destroy any positive legacy of the other, as the Trump administration continues its drive to sabotage President Obama's successful Iran nuclear accord, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Those wishing to kill the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program, have never given up. The agreement's ever-lengthening successful record, now more than two years old, of keeping closed all possible pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon ought to have discouraged would-be deal-slayers. But the slayers got a new lease on life with the election of Donald Trump, who, as part of his program of opposing whatever Barack Obama favored and destroying whatever he accomplished, has consistently berated the JCPOA.

The themes that the agreement's opponents push are now familiar. One of those themes is that the Obama administration was over-eager to get the agreement and consequently gave up the store to conclude the accord. This argument never made sense, given the terms of the JCPOA. The asymmetries in the agreement go against the Iranians, who came under a more intrusive nuclear inspection arrangement than any other country has ever willingly accepted, and who had to fulfill almost all of their obligations to break down and set back their nuclear program before gaining an ounce of additional sanctions relief. But the argument has had the attraction for the opponents of not being directly disprovable as far as any mindset of former officials is concerned, and of jibing with the opponents' further theme of a mythical "better deal" that supposedly was there for the taking.

An additional theme from the opponents has been that the JCPOA fails to address other Iranian policies and actions that have ritualistically come to be labeled as nefarious, malign, destabilizing behavior (NMDB). This argument hasn't made sense either, given that it was clear from the outset of negotiations that no agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program would be possible if the parties negotiating the agreement dumped onto the table their other grievances against each other. Any such futile expansion of the negotiating agenda would have meant that the Iranian nuclear program would have advanced ever closer to the capability of making a bomb *and* there still would have been the NMDB.

Nonetheless, the theme has been a favorite of opponents because it distracts attention from the success of the JCPOA in preventing an Iranian nuke, because there always will be some sort of objectionable Iranian action that can be

pointed out, and because the NMDB mantra has now been chanted so much that it has come to be accepted as an unquestioned given.

Josh Meyer recently offered a variant on these themes with an extended article in *Politico* under the tantalizing title, “The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook”. The attention-getting theme that the author pushes is that a task force of the Drug Enforcement Administration investigating drug trafficking and other criminal activity of Lebanese Hezbollah was stymied by “the White House’s desire for a nuclear deal with Iran”. Unsurprisingly, this theme has been replayed by the usual players dedicated to bashing the JCPOA or anything Obama-related, such as the *Wall Street Journal* editorial writers. Some Republicans in Congress and even Eric Trump have echoed the theme.

The 13,000-word article aims to overwhelm with detail. Through the sheer volume of leads, tips, suspicions, and genuine facts, the reader gets the impression of a thoroughly reported piece. And Meyer clearly put a lot of work into it. But as Erik Wemple of the *Washington Post* points out in an article about the article, Meyer never produces any direct evidence that the White House intentionally impeded the task force’s work, much less that any such interference had to do with the impending nuclear agreement. After wading through all the detail, the careful reader can see that the attention-getting thesis about the Obama administration supposedly sacrificing drug and crime enforcement on the altar of the nuclear agreement rests on suspicion and innuendo. It rests on statements such as that some decisions about the Hezbollah case “might have been influenced” by an inter-agency group’s awareness of the nuclear negotiations—meaning that, as Wemple notes, the decisions just as easily might not have been influenced by such awareness.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration took numerous tough sanctions and law enforcement actions against Hezbollah, both before and after conclusion of the JCPOA. Meyer includes in his article—and give Meyer credit for this inclusion—statements by former Obama administration officials alluding to those actions. The very separation of the nuclear file from other grievances by or against Iran—which, as noted above, was essential to concluding any nuclear agreement at all—implied that there would *not* be any moratorium on enforcement actions against Iran’s Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Meyer’s piece suffers from a sourcing problem in that it relies heavily on just two sources who currently are employed by, or affiliated with, organizations in the forefront of opposing the JCPOA. One of those sources, David Asher, is on an advisory board of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has become mission control for undermining and trying to kill the nuclear agreement.

Whether or not such institutional connections affected what was told to Meyer,

the account of a task force within DEA that felt frustrated that the rest of the government did not run fast and run automatically with whatever case it was building has the familiar ring of something that happens regularly, and quite properly and understandably, inside government. Such happening need not have anything to do with White House interference or with any pending international agreement such as the JCPOA. When a team of officials works hard on a project—as this team in DEA that was investigating some of Hezbollah’s activities undoubtedly did—its members naturally will feel frustrated by any inter-agency review that keeps the government from acting fully and immediately on whatever the team came up with (by, say, quickly filing a criminal indictment in federal court). Such review is vital. Typically there are not just one but several important national interests and equities that need to be considered, and that go beyond what the more narrowly focused team members would have had in mind.

In the case of Hezbollah and drug-running, those other considerations would have included such things as the possibility of violent responses, the cost of possibly losing sources of information on the group being investigated, and the legal soundness of any criminal case brought to court. Some of these considerations get misleadingly presented in Meyer’s article as if they were part of some Obama administration effort to put brakes on legal actions against Hezbollah for the sake of preserving the nuclear agreement. For example, former counterterrorism adviser Lisa Monaco is said to have “expressed concerns about using RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] laws against top Hezbollah leaders and about the possibility of reprisals”. As the *Post*’s Wemple observes, “ ‘Expressing concerns’ about certain law enforcement strategies may have been Monaco’s way of, like, using her governmental experience to sharpen U.S. policy, rather than working as the cog in an alleged plot to take it easy on Hezbollah.”

Beyond the multiple severe weaknesses in Meyer’s argument about what the Obama administration did or did not do are two important pieces of context that he never addresses. One concerns just what difference a more aggressive campaign against Hezbollah during the period in question, even if it were possible, would have made. Meyer makes it sound as if doing or not doing everything that this one task force in DEA wanted to do was the difference between crippling or not crippling a grave security threat. In an interview on NPR, Meyer asserted that the Obama administration “did allow a group that was a regionally focused militia-slash-political organization with a terrorist wing to become a much more wealthy global criminal organization that has a lot of money that can now be used to bankroll terrorist and military actions around the world.” No, it didn’t. Even if one were to believe everything that Meyer’s piece insinuates about an alleged White House obstructionist operation motivated by nuclear

negotiations, this would not have made Hezbollah “a much more wealthy” organization, much less have made it more likely to conduct terrorist and military actions “around the world”.

Hezbollah has been in existence for more than three decades. During that time it has grown into a strong and multifaceted organization, including being recognized as a major political movement, with seats in the Lebanese parliament and portfolios in the Lebanese government. Money-making criminal operations have long been a part of Hezbollah’s activity, and investigations and legal action—through several U.S. administrations—have long been a part of the U.S. response to that activity. What one disgruntled team in DEA wanted to do during one administration was a minor episode in this story, not the make-or-break development that Meyer portrays it as.

Another piece of context applies to the whole theme, of which Meyer’s article is one manifestation, about the Obama administration supposedly drooling over a prospective nuclear agreement with Iran and giving it priority over everything else. It wasn’t Obama who gave the specter of an Iranian nuclear weapon overriding priority. It was other people who did that, and especially people who today lead the charge for aggressive confrontation with Iran and for killing the JCPOA. Well before the negotiations that would lead to the JCPOA ever began, the rallying cry of these forces was that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be one of the gravest dangers the United States ever faced. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney identified this possibility as the single most serious security threat against the United States. Most prominent among the alarmists was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made sure the whole world would understand his dumbed-down message by displaying a cartoon bomb before the United Nations General Assembly. It was only after the JCPOA closed all possible avenues to an Iranian nuclear weapon—and drained Netanyahu’s Looney Tunes bomb in the process—that we started hearing from the same forces more about how the JCPOA supposedly is bad because it doesn’t address other nefarious Iran-related activity. Activity such as drug-running by Hezbollah.

Imagine that everything Meyer’s piece says or implies were true. Imagine that the Obama administration really did see a choice between getting the JCPOA and cracking down on Hezbollah’s criminal activity. And imagine that the Obama administration said “yes” to everything that gung-ho team in DEA may have wanted to do. Then presumably the administration also would have to say, “Well, yes, we did have a chance to negotiate an agreement that would prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, but we thought a drug bust was more important.” How would the alarmists, who had been ringing the alarm bell so long and hard about an Iranian nuclear weapon, react to that? We can be confident the reaction would not be to

express compliments to Mr. Obama.

The gross inconsistency of those opposing the JCPOA reflects how their real objectives have little to do with the terms of the agreement or how it was negotiated. Their objectives have more to do with not wanting anyone to have any agreement with Iran on anything (Netanyahu's objective, while he portrays Iran as the sole source of everything bad in the Middle East), or about staying in step with American supporters of Netanyahu's government, or about not wanting any of Barack Obama's accomplishments to survive.

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