

# Trump Vindicates Iranian Hardliners and Victimizes Ordinary Citizens

Donald Trump's decision to pull the U.S. out of the Iranian nuclear deal only strengthens Iranian hardliners, hurts average people and drives up the potential for a devastating war, argue Trita Parsi and Ryan Costello.

By Trita Parsi and Ryan Costello



When the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was announced in 2015, the Iranian people poured into the streets to celebrate what they thought was the beginning of a new era.

Long squeezed by both U.S. pressure and their own government, they had just cause for optimism. The threat of war was receding, and the sanctions that had stifled Iran's economy were soon to be lifted. Many hoped that Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, vindicated by his success at the negotiating table, would leverage his political capital and ease Iran's harsh security environment at home.

Today, as President Donald Trump tears up the agreement, the Iranian people are once again those who will suffer most. Iranian hardliners, empowered by the deal's failure, are sharpening their knives for Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and the chances of catastrophic war are undoubtedly greater.

Iran did everything it needed to comply with the accord's terms, destroying the core of its reactor at Arak, empowering International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors and dramatically limiting its uranium enrichment program. Sanctions were initially lifted under President Barack Obama, and Iran saw some limited relief. But that long-overdue optimism was quickly halted by the election of Trump, who vowed to terminate the agreement struck under his predecessor. Iran's hopes for a brighter future had been turned over to a reality TV star turned demagogue.

## A More Imminent Threat of War

Doubts about whether Trump actually meant what he said during his volatile campaign were put to rest in the first

week of his presidency, when he banned Iranians and many others from entering

the United States on the basis of little more than bigotry.

Shortly after the ban, Trump began subjecting the nuclear deal to a death by a thousand cuts. Major deals with international companies like Boeing never came to fruition. European banks, fearful of U.S. sanctions that remained on the books, refused to re-enter the Iranian market. Moreover, Trump and his top officials repeatedly violated the accord, warning foreign companies against doing business with Iran while leaving the implementation of U.S. commitments in doubt.

And in March, Trump began elevating the most caustic voices on Iran to key national security positions. John Bolton, who has never stopped calling for bombing Iran and took money from a despised Iranian terrorist cult that seeks regime change, became national security adviser. Mike Pompeo, one of the foremost opponents of the nuclear deal, is now secretary of state. The threat of war has returned, this time more imminent than ever before.

Many Iranians are again feeling hopeless, due to a variety of factors, not the least of which is an economy stifled by sanctions, a fact that manifested in December and January when Iran was rocked by the largest protests since the 2009 Green Movement. Yet, many stayed home, not out of support for the regime but out of fear for what might come next.

Now the hardline narrative, that the United States cannot be trusted and will never lift the sanctions, has been vindicated by Trump's shortsighted and self-serving decision to abrogate the nuclear accord. The hardliners seek to seize back all levers of power from moderates like Rouhani and Zarif, to destroy hopes for reform and to ensure the elevation of a hardline successor to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. If they succeed in doing so, it will mean greater repression at home and escalation abroad.

Yet, much like hardliners in Washington, Iranian hardliners have no good "plan B" for what comes after the deal. And, given the suddenness of Trump's decision to rip up the deal without an Iranian violation, Rouhani and Zarif have been given one last chance to salvage nuclear compromise and to prevent Trump's war cabinet from finding a justification to put their war and regime change plans into place.

European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has vowed that Europe will stick with its commitments under the deal, acting within its security interests and protecting its economic investments. French President Emmanuel Macron has warned that Trump's decision threatens the very fabric of the nonproliferation regime. Critically, Rouhani as well has indicated that Iran can achieve benefits under the JCPOA without the United States. This sets the stage

for a last-ditch effort for Europe, Russia, China and Iran to negotiate a follow-on deal, with Europe taking steps to mitigate the effects of U.S. sanctions re-imposition and protecting companies doing business with Iran.

But the chances for such a follow-on agreement, even absent Trump, are slim.

Europe, in particular, is extremely vulnerable to U.S. sanctions, and Europe has been slow to recognize that its best hope for keeping the nuclear deal rests not with cultivating Trump but in blocking Trump. Israel and Saudi Arabia also hold many cards that could short-circuit diplomacy and drag the United States into direct military confrontation.

The majority of the Iranian people, though, have little choice but to hope that Rouhani and Zarif can navigate these treacherous waters, lest Iran be torn apart by outside powers, just like Iraq and Syria before them.

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## The Tragedy of Benjamin Netanyahu

In presenting no new information about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program, the Israeli prime minister is actually undermining his own country's security, argues Trita Parsi.

**By Trita Parsi**



There is something tragic about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The harder he tries, the more he fails. That has been the case with many of his attempts to sabotage diplomacy with Iran and push the US to take military action against the country. And that was certainly the case with his underwhelming powerpoint presentation Monday. What was supposed to be a smoking gun to once and for all nix the Iran nuclear deal, inadvertently made [a powerful case](#) as to [why the the deal must remain in place](#).

The Israeli government had promised "significant new revelations" about the nuclear program. Yet Netanyahu offered nothing new. The bulk of his presentation focused on what the world already knew: That between 1999 and 2003, Iran had

engaged in activities with possible military dimensions.

As I describe in [Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran and the Triumph of Diplomacy](#), these past Iranian activities constituted a tricky dilemma during the nuclear talks. If it was revealed that the Iranians had indeed engaged in illegal military research, that could jeopardize the entire agreement, as voices would be raised to have it punished for its past violations. Completely disregarding it without allowing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to complete its investigation—which the Iranians had not been cooperating with—was also not an option. What it came down to was a choice between punishment for Iran's past violations and guarantees that those violations would never be repeated in the future.

### **Obama's Choice**

The obvious choice for Obama was the latter: punishing Iran for its past errors was of little value if punishment came at the expense of a deal that would prevent Iran from building a bomb. Politically, however, this choice was feasible only if the IAEA could complete its investigation—with the cooperation of the Iranians—to make a final judgment on the issue and close the file. The P5+1 needed neither an admission of guilt nor a guilty verdict; they just needed Iran's cooperation to complete the investigation.

The Iranians feared that giving the IAEA more access would only lead to more demands and investigations. To Iran, it was critical that any investigation would be time-limited, so it couldn't drag on indefinitely, and delinked from the sanctions relief process, so that the decision to lift sanctions couldn't be held hostage to the Possible Military Dimensions (*PMD*) investigation.

Eventually, a compromise was reached in which the Iranians would make their documents accessible and their scientists available for interviews for the purposes of producing a time-limited report that would contain both the IAEA's assessments and Iran's responses and contributions. The report would essentially include two narratives, which meant that there wouldn't be an authoritative judgment. More importantly, the sanctions relief process would be linked to the completion of the IAEA investigation and not its conclusion. That is, the IAEA would have to report only that Iran had cooperated with the investigation and that the IAEA's questions were answered in order for the green light for sanctions reform to be lit.

In July 2015, the head of the IAEA flew to Tehran and concluded a final agreement that established a timeline for resolving the question of Iran's past activities whereby Iran would turn over all information requested by the IAEA,

and the IAEA would provide its final assessment by December 15 of that year.

The IAEA [issued its report](#) on December 2, 2015 concluding that Iran had pursued a nuclear weapons program prior to 2003, but that this organized program ended that year and that there was no evidence that any undeclared activities had taken place since 2009.

### **Case Closed**

Following the report, the 35-member IAEA Board of Governors voted unanimously to conclude the investigation into Iran's past weaponization work. The case was officially closed.

Now, without presenting *any new* information – and without even attempting to claim that Iran's undeclared activities had continued beyond 2009 or 2015 – Bibi wants to convince the world that he has discovered something new.

He hasn't.

As one former IAEA official [publicly commented](#): "I just saw a lot of pictures I had seen before."



Iran's past military activities are precisely why the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is needed: The deal significantly limited Iran's program and closed off all of Tehran's pathways to a bomb. And thanks to the inspections regime, Iran cannot engage in any such clandestine activities without getting caught.

All of these restrictions, limitations and inspections will be lost if Donald Trump follows Netanyahu's advice and kills the deal on May 12.

And therein lies the tragedy of Netanyahu.

By helping to kill the Iran deal, Netanyahu may advance his own political interest, but only by undermining that of Israel's. Bibi may consider himself the biggest political winner of the Iran deal's collapse. Yet, Israel will count

among some of the biggest losers of this diplomatic travesty.

*This article originally appeared at The American Conservative.*

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## How Trump's Iran Decision Invites War

By decertifying the Iran-nuke deal, President Trump opts for another Mideast war of choice, but war on Iran is really the choice of Israel and Saudi Arabia wanting the U.S. to do the killing and dying, as Trita Parsi explains.

By Trita Parsi

Make no mistake: We do not have a crisis over the Iran nuclear deal. It is working and everyone from Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to the U.S. and Israeli intelligence services to the International Atomic Energy Agency agree: Iran is adhering to the deal.

But President Trump is about to take a working deal and turn it into a crisis – an international crisis that very likely can lead to war. While the decertification of the Iran deal that Trump is scheduled to announce on Friday in and of itself doesn't collapse the deal, it does trigger a process that increases the risk of war in the following five ways.

### **1. If the deal collapses, so do the restrictions on Iran's nuclear program**

The nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) took two very bad scenarios off the table: It blocked all of Iran's paths to a nuclear bomb and it prevented war with Iran. By killing the deal, Trump is putting both of those bad scenarios back on the table.

As I describe in my book *Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran and the triumph of Diplomacy*, it was the very real danger of a military conflict that drove the Barack Obama administration to become so dedicated to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis. In January 2012, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated publicly that Iran's breakout – the time it would take from making the decision to build the bomb to having the material for a bomb – was 12 months. In spite of massive sanctions on Iran aimed at both retarding the nuclear program and convincing the Iranians that the nuclear program was too costly to continue, the Iranians aggressively expanded their nuclear activities.

By January 2013, exactly a year later, a new sense of urgency dawned on the White House. Iran's breakout time had shrunk from 12 months to a mere 8-12 weeks. If Iran decided to dash for a bomb, the United States might not have enough time to stop Tehran militarily.

According to former CIA deputy director Michael Morell, Iran's shrinking breakout time caused the U.S. to be "closer to war with the Islamic Republic than at any time since 1979." Other countries realized the danger as well. "The actual threat of military action was almost felt as electricity in the air before a thunderstorm," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told me.

If nothing changed, President Obama concluded, the U.S. would soon face a binary option: Either go to war with Iran (due to pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and some elements inside the U.S.) to stop its nuclear program or acquiesce to Iran's nuclear fait accompli. The only way out of this lose-lose situation was a diplomatic solution. Three months later, the U.S. and Iran held a pivotal secret meeting in Oman where the Obama administration managed to secure a diplomatic breakthrough that paved the way for the JCPOA.

The deal prevented war. Killing the deal prevents the peace. If Trump collapses the deal and the Iranians restart their program, the U.S. will soon find itself facing the same dilemma that Obama did in 2013. The difference is that the President is now Donald Trump, a man who doesn't even know how to spell diplomacy, let alone conduct it.

## **2. Trump is planning to take on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps**

Decertification is only half the story. Trump also plans to significantly escalate tensions with Iran in the region, including taking a measure that both the Bush and Obama administrations rejected: Designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. Make no mistake, the IRGC is far from an army of saints. It is responsible for much of the repression against the population inside of Iran and it fought the U.S. military indirectly in Iraq through Shia militias. But it has also been one of the most critical fighting forces against ISIS.

In real terms, the designation does not add much to the pressure the U.S. already is or can impose on the IRGC. But it ratchets things up in a very dangerous way without any clear benefits to the United States. The drawbacks, however, are crystal clear.

IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari issued a stern warning last week: "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 [ISIS] all around the world.” If the IRGC acts on its warning and targets U.S. troops – and there are 10,000 such targets in Iraq – we will only be a few steps away from war.

### **3. Trump is escalating without having any exit-ramps**

Escalation is under all circumstances a dangerous game. But it is particularly dangerous when you do not have diplomatic channels that ensure that the other side reads your signals correctly and that provide mechanisms for de-escalation. Not having such exit-ramps is like driving a car without a brake. You can accelerate, you can crash, but you can't brake.

Military commanders understand this. That's what former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen warned about prior to the Obama administration investing in diplomacy. “We've not had a direct link of communication with Iran since 1979,” Mullen said. “And I think that has planted many seeds for miscalculation. When you miscalculate, you can escalate and misunderstand... We are not talking to Iran, so we don't understand each other. If something happens, it's virtually assured that we won't get it right – that there will be miscalculation which would be extremely dangerous in that part of the world.”

Mullen issued this warning when Obama was president, a man often criticized for being too restrained and too unwilling to use military power. Imagine how nervous and worried Mullen must be today with Trump calling the shots in the situation room.

### **4. Some U.S. allies want the U.S. to fight their war with Iran**

There is no secret that Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been pushing the U.S. for years to go to war with Iran. Israel in particular was not only making threats of preemptive military action itself, its ultimate aim was to convince the United States to conduct the attack on Iran's nuclear facilities for Israel.

“The intention,” former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak admitted to the Israeli paper Ynet in July of this year, “was both to make the Americans increase sanctions and to carry out the operation.”

While the Israeli security establishment today opposes killing the nuclear deal (Barak himself said as much in an interview with the New York Times this week), there are no indications that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has changed his mind on this matter. He has called on Trump to “fix or nix” the deal, though his criteria for how to fix the deal is so unrealistic it virtually ensures the deal will collapse – which in turn would put the U.S. on a path to war with Iran.

The only person who arguably has a worse sense of judgment than Trump is Netanyahu. After all, this is what he told U.S. lawmakers in 2002 as he lobbied them to invade Iraq: "If you take out Saddam, Saddam's regime, I guarantee you that it will have enormous positive reverberations on the region."

#### **5. Trump's donors are obsessed with starting war with Iran**

Some have suggested that Trump is pursuing the decertification of the Iran deal – in spite of the near consensus advice of his top advisors to not go down this path – as a result of pressure from his base. But there is no evidence that his base cares much about this issue.

Rather, as Eli Clifton meticulously had documented, the most dedicated force behind Trump's obsession with killing the Iran deal is not his base, but a tiny group of top Republican donors. "A small number of his biggest campaign and legal defense donors have made extreme comments about Iran and, in at least one case, advocated for the use of a nuclear weapon against the Islamic Republic," Clifton wrote last month.

The billionaire Home Depot founder Bernard Marcus, for instance, has given Trump \$101,700 to help pay Trump and Donald Trump Jr.'s legal fees following the probe into Russian election interference. Hedge-fund billionaire Paul Singer is another major donor to pro-war groups in Washington who Trump has relied upon for financial support. The most famous billionaire donor, of course, is Sheldon Adelson who has contributed \$35 million to pro-Trump Super PAC Future 45. All of these donors have pushed for war with Iran, though only Adelson has gone as far as to suggest the U.S. should strike Iran with nuclear weapons as a negotiating tactic.

Thus far, Trump has gone with the advice of these billionaires on Iran over that of his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff.

None of the above five scenarios were realistic a few months ago. They have become plausible – even likely – because Trump has decided to make them so. Just like with George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, Trump's confrontation with Iran is a war of choice, not a war of necessity.

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**[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/5-reasons-why-trump-is-moving-towards-war-with-iran\\_us\\_59df6f8de4b0fdad73b27711?section=us\\_contributor](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/5-reasons-why-trump-is-moving-towards-war-with-iran_us_59df6f8de4b0fdad73b27711?section=us_contributor)**

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## Trump Plunges Deeper in Mideast Chaos

Sales of more U.S. weapons to Saudi Arabia may portend more chaos in the Middle East but President Trump justifies the move with his rhetoric about “jobs, jobs, jobs,” as Trita Parsi explained at Middle East Eye.

By Trita Parsi

President Donald Trump’s visit to the Middle East has turned out as expected: no single act of outreach to the Muslim world could undo his fueling of Islamophobia and no amount of Iranophobia could cover up the irony of Trump and Saudi Arabia uniting against intolerance.

It is clear what Trump wanted from the trip: massive arms sales and Saudi investments in the U.S. economy. But it is less clear why Saudi Arabia and Israel once again depict Iran as an existential threat even after Tehran’s nuclear program has been checked.

The answer lies not in Iran’s regional policy, but Israel and Saudi Arabia’s wish for the U.S. to re-establish hard, American hegemony in the Middle East. That is, for the United States to lead and underwrite the Herculean task of sorting out the chaos in the region. In short: Saudi and Israel first.

A key factor explaining the violence in the Middle East in the past few decades is that the region has lacked a sustainable, indigenous order. The process of establishing an order is by definition disruptive and the Middle East has almost continuously been in this state since the end of the Cold War.

To make matters worse, the temporary equilibriums that briefly provided a resemblance of order were established and sustained by an external power – the United States – rather than by the states of the region themselves. As a result, these temporary periods of stability could only last as long as the external power was willing to sustain the order with its own blood and treasure.

## **Pursuing Hegemony**

This was certainly the case with Washington's Dual Containment policy in the mid-1990s. After the end of the Cold War, the United States had the option of establishing a new, inclusive security architecture for the region. Instead, it opted to pursue an order centered on Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia while keeping Iran and Iraq in continued isolation.

Not surprisingly, Iran emerged as the main opponent to the American order as it viewed itself as a regional power that should help lead the region rather than be excluded from its security and political structures.

Iran calculated that the weakest link in the American strategy was the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. If the peace process failed, so would Washington's efforts to establish an order based on Iran's prolonged isolation. Iran began to heavily support Palestinian rejectionist groups who used terror against Israel in the hope of collapsing the peace negotiations.

As the U.S. sought to isolate and contain Iran, and thwart its efforts to challenge the U.S.-led order, Washington began portraying Iran as the number one threat to the region's security, categorizing it as a pariah and rogue state.

"Wherever you look, you find the evil hand of Iran in this region," Secretary of State Warren Christopher said in March 1995, essentially blaming all of the region's woes on Tehran.

All-out isolation of Iran could not be achieved unless the broader international community began viewing the clerical regime as a rogue actor, which in turn necessitated them buying into the American and Israeli line that Iran was the root cause of all of the region's ills.

## **Isolate Iran, Part II**

Today, even prior to the visit to Saudi Arabia, Trump's Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had begun echoing Warren Christopher's rhetoric on Iran.

"Everywhere you look if there is trouble in the region, you find Iran," Mattis told reporters in Riyadh last week.

Just as Christopher and the Clinton administration's approach towards Iran in the 1990s was heavily influenced by Israel, Mattis and the Trump administration appear to be heavily colored – if not directed – by Saudi Arabia.

Washington's talking points on Yemen are now mirror images of Riyadh's: the Houthi rebels in Yemen are Iranian proxies rather than independent Yemeni actors, the Yemeni civil war is the result of Iranian meddling rather than the

result of a power struggle between various Yemeni factions, and the defeat of the Houthis is necessary to prevent “Iranian hegemony” in the region.

Mattis has even repeated the blatantly false assertion that the only country the Islamic State (ISIS) group hasn’t attacked is Iran.

“I consider ISIS nothing more than an excuse for Iran to continue its mischief,” Mattis said in 2015. “Iran is not an enemy of ISIS; they have a lot to gain from the turmoil that ISIS creates.... I would just point out one question for you to look into. What is the one country in the Middle East that has not been attacked by ISIS? One. That is Iran. That is more than happenstance, I’m sure.”

In reality, not only has ISIS tried (and failed) to attack Iran, Tehran played a critical role in preventing ISIS from capturing Baghdad in 2014, according to Iraqi officials.

### **Music to Saudi and Israeli ears**

Moreover, the Trump administration’s rhetoric increasingly paints Iran – and not ISIS – as the main threat in the region. Some supporters of the Trump administration have long played down the threat from ISIS, arguing that ISIS is a short-term problem, while Iran poses a longer-term challenge precisely because of its opposition to American hegemony.

This flip-flop echoes the line taken by Israel (and even some GCC countries) ever since the rise of ISIS. Israel is not threatened by Islamic State and Iran is a larger threat to the Jewish state, Israel’s Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon said in November 2015. The West’s excessive focus on ISIS is benefiting Iran, Israel maintains, and gives Tehran an opportunity to portray itself as an ally of the West while in reality it continues to destabilize the region.

But just as Washington’s depiction of Iran as the culprit behind regional instability was widely exaggerated in the 1990s and aimed at masking U.S. frustration with Iranian opposition to the specific regional order Washington preferred, Trump’s desire to blame Iran for the region’s instability and suggest that Iran has a tacit alliance with ISIS is equally – if not more – questionable.

Not because Iran is a constructive player in the Middle East (arguably, only Oman qualifies for that title) or because it hasn’t contributed to the region’s conflicts, but because putting all the blame at the feet of Tehran is simply too convenient.

It is, however, music to Saudi and Israeli ears. Trump dusting off Christopher’s talking points on Iran signals that he’s acquiescing to Saudi and Israeli

demands to re-establish American hegemony in the Middle East and revert back to a policy of seeking Iran's complete isolation.

"Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate it," Trump said in Riyadh.

### **Questionable Alliance**

For the Saudis, this is more important than scrapping the nuclear deal because in reality it targets the very core of that agreement. The nuclear deal aimed to resolve the nuclear dispute with Iran in order to pave the way for a new, inclusive regional security dialogue – one that would include Iran. It signaled an end to hard American hegemony and the policy of Iranian isolation. A nightmare, in short, for the Saudis.

But while it is understandable that some American allies prefer that the U.S. pays for the security of the region with its blood and treasure, few in Washington ask whether this policy benefits America.

Clearly, the Middle East – with its vast energy resources – has been a strategic region for decades. And while the region had strong states, maintaining a balance of power was not too costly. But today, the value of hegemony in the region is questionable. The energy resources are less valuable. And the cost of security has skyrocketed as a result of the collapse of states and societies in the region. On top of that, no state or movement in the region is in a position to challenge the U.S. global position.

Bottom line is: the cost-benefit analysis of hegemony in the Middle East no longer holds up. But Trump doesn't seem to care. As long as he gets the arms sales, he seems indifferent to the cost this questionable alliance with Saudi Arabia will impose on the U.S. in the long run.

It's an aspect of the art of the deal only he seems to understand and very few question.

**Trita Parsi is the president of the National Iranian American Council and author of the forthcoming book, *Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (Yale University Press, 2017). [This article originally appeared at MiddleEastEye at**

**<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/trump-middle-east-america-first-saudi-and-israel-first-741308402>.]**

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# Iran's Victory for Moderation

Iranian President Rouhani's solid reelection victory clears the way for Iran to continue its efforts to reengage with the global community and expand freedoms domestically, reports Trita Parsi.

By Trita Parsi

The Iranian population's political sophistication continues to impress. Despite a highly flawed political system where the elections are neither fair nor free, the overwhelmingly majority chose a non-violent path to bring about progress.

They massively participated in the elections with a 75 percent turnout – compare that to the turnout in the U.S. elections in 2016, 56 percent – and handed the incumbent moderate President Hassan Rouhani a landslide victory with 57 percent of the vote.

In a regional context, this election is even more remarkable. In most of the Middle East, elections are not even held. Take Saudi Arabia for instance, President Donald Trump's choice for his first foreign trip.

There are a few things we can say about the meaning of the Iranian people's collective action.

First of all, once again, Iranians voted against the candidate who was believed to be favored by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This is now a strong pattern.

Secondly, the Iranians rebuked exiled opposition groups and Washington hawks and neocons who called on the Iranian people to either boycott the elections or vote for the hardline candidate Ebrahim Raisi in order to hasten a confrontation. Clearly, these elements have no following in Iran.

Third, despite Trump's undermining of the nuclear deal with Iran, and despite significant problems with the sanctions relief process which has left many Iranians disappointed in the nuclear deal, Iranians still chose diplomacy, detente and moderation over the confrontational line of previous Iranian administrations. Iran is today one of the few countries in the world where a message of moderation and anti-populism secures you a landslide election victory.

## **Human Rights Mandate**

Fourth, despite Rouhani falling short on his promises to improve the human

rights situation in Iran, Iranians and the leaders of the Green Movement leaders gave him a second chance. But now he has a stronger mandate – and fewer excuses. Now is the time for him to deliver on the promises that inspired tens of millions of Iranians to elect him twice as president.

He must take decisive action to protect the human rights and civil liberties of the Iranian people, pursue improved relations with the world, and promote economic growth for the Iranian people. The hardline forces behind Iran's arbitrary arrests and spiking executions may not answer to Rouhani directly, but the Iranian people who elected him expect him to do more in his second term to bring about change.

Failure to do so risks disenchanting a generation of Iranians from the belief that their voice can make a difference, potentially ceding Iran's future to the hardline voices who would take the country back to isolationism and confrontation with the West.

Fifth, while Saudi Arabia is hosting Trump and pushing him to return to a policy of complete isolation of Iran, the European Union Foreign Policy head Federica Mogherini congratulated Rouhani on his election victory and recommitted the E.U. to the nuclear deal. The election results will strengthen the E.U.'s dedication to ensuring the deal's survival as well as its commitment to an inclusive security framework for the Middle East.

Consequently, the E.U. will oppose Trump and Saudi Arabia's attempt to stage a confrontation with Iran. This puts the Trump administration once again out of synch with Europe and the U.S.'s Western allies on a key security issue.

### **Diplomacy Over War**

Sixth, Iranians have once again endorsed a policy of dialogue with the West, but the question is if Trump will unclench his fist and embrace this window for diplomacy. Just as the nuclear crisis was resolved through negotiations, the remaining points of conflict between the U.S. and Iran can also be resolved diplomatically, including Syria and Yemen. This is what the Middle East needs now – more diplomacy, not more arms sales.

Seventh, Congress should avoid undermining the clear pro-engagement message sent by the Iranian people and empowering hardliners by pushing forward provocative sanctions legislation in the wake of the election results. New Senate sanctions are scheduled to be marked-up in committee this coming week. What a horrible response to the Iranian people after they voted for diplomacy and moderation.

Finally, the power struggle in Iran will increasingly shift towards the question of who will succeed Ayatollah Khamenei and become Iran's next Supreme Leader. It

is widely believed that Rouhani is eyeing this position. With his landslide victory, he has improved his prospects. To some extent, this is what this presidential election was really about.

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## Israel’s Wolf-Crying about Iran’s Bomb

Despite Israeli and neocon-led doomsday talk, the year-old Iranian nuclear agreement has achieved its principal goal of stopping Iran from getting the Bomb and has even quieted alarums from Israel, writes Trita Parsi.

By Trita Parsi

A year has passed since diplomats from Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany) defied conventional wisdom and struck a deal aimed at both preventing Iran from getting the bomb and preventing it from getting bombed.

At the time, the deal’s detractors were apoplectic; Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a “historic mistake” that would pave the way for Iran to obtain a bomb. But the world has not come to an end. Iran is not the hegemon of the Middle East, Israel can still be found on the map, and Washington and Tehran still define each other as enemies. These days, voices such as Jonathan Greenblatt of the Anti-Defamation League, criticize the deal for having changed too little.

But a closer examination shows that it has had a profound impact on the region’s geopolitical dynamics. Only four years ago, the Iranian nuclear program was consistently referred to as the United States’ number one national security threat. Senior U.S. officials put the risk of an Israeli attack on Iran at 50–50, a confrontation that the United States would quickly get dragged into. A war that was even more destabilizing than the Iraq invasion was not just a possibility; it seemed likely.

Today, however, the talk of war is gone. Even the hawkish government of Netanyahu has gone silent on the matter. Former Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, a

hawk in his own right, announced a few weeks ago that “at this point, and in the foreseeable future, there is no existential threat facing Israel. Thus it is fitting that the leadership of the country stop scaring the citizenry and stop giving them the feeling that we are standing before a second Holocaust.”

Moreover, members of the U.S. Congress who have recently visited Israel have also noted that Israelis are no longer shifting every conversation to a discussion about the Iranian nuclear threat.

“I can’t count how many times I, and many members of Congress, were urgently and passionately informed that negotiation with the Iranian menace was wishful thinking and the height of folly,” Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, wrote after a recent visit to Israel. “And now? Nothing.”

### **Silence, Not Admission**

The nuclear deal has thus halted the march toward war and Iran’s progress toward a bomb. And that certainly qualifies as significant change. To continue to argue that Israel and the region are not safer as a result of the deal would be to contend that Iran’s nuclear program was never a threat to begin with. That is a not a position that the Likud government in Israel can argue with a straight face.

Other criticisms of the deal centered on predictions that Iran would not honor the agreement. Yet the International Atomic Energy Agency has reported that Iran is abiding by its obligations under the deal. Also not borne out have been prophecies that Iran’s regional policies would radicalize, that the deal would, as The Heritage Foundation’s James Phillips wrote, “project [American] weakness that could further encourage Iranian hardliners.”

To be sure, Washington continues to view many of Iran’s regional activities as unhelpful and destabilizing, but those activities have not increased as a result of the nuclear deal. Hezbollah and Tehran’s posture toward Israel has, for instance, not become more aggressive than it already was.

Any changes that have occurred have been rooted in regional developments – the Syrian civil war or the Saudi assault on Yemen – rather than the nuclear deal. Important developments in Syria, such as Russia’s broader entry into the war or Iran’s maneuvers on the ground, are divorced from the nuclear deal and directly tied to developments on the ground in Syria.

If anything, as the European Union’s foreign policy head, Federica Mogherini, told me last December, the deal paved the way for renewed dialogue on Syria, which offers a glimmer of hope to end the carnage there.

“What we have now in Syria – talks bringing together all the different actors (and we have it now and not last year) – is because we had the [nuclear] deal,” she told me. And last month, U.S. Secretary Of State John Kerry stated that Iran has been “helpful” in Iraq, where both the United States and Iran are fighting the Islamic State (ISIS).

### **Shifting Relationship**

It is undisputable that outside of the nuclear deal, the relationship between the United States and Iran has shifted significantly since the breakthrough. That became abundantly clear in January, when ten American sailors drifted into Iranian waters and were apprehended by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – and were then promptly released.

An incident that in the pre-deal era likely would have taken months, if not years, to resolve was now settled in 16 hours. Direct diplomacy between Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif combined with a mutual desire to resolve the matter quickly made all the difference. The two countries had embarked on a path that could transform their relationship, and both were too committed to that path to allow the incident to fester.

“I was afraid that this [the sailors’ arrest] would jeopardize everything, not just the implementation [of the JCPOA],” Zarif admitted to me.

But for relations to improve beyond the nuclear deal, moderate elements on both sides need to be strengthened by the deal. That is one area where the skepticism of the critics may have been justified. Rather than seeing the government of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani gain momentum after the deal, the pushback from Iranian hardliners has been fierce.

Those officials couldn’t prevent Iran from signing the agreement, but they could create enough problems to halt any effort to translate the nuclear deal into a broader opening to the United States. A swift crackdown against individuals and entities seeking to build bridges between Iran and the West had its intended effect: Confidence that the nuclear deal would usher in a new era for U.S.-Iranian relations quickly plummeted.

Moreover, challenges to sanctions relief has given hardline opponents of the deal in Iran a boost. Their critique of the agreement – that the United States is not trustworthy – seems to ring true since no major banks have been willing to enter the Iranian market. The banks’ hesitation, in turn, is mainly rooted in the fear that after the U.S. presidential elections, Washington’s political commitment to the deal will wane.

Neither Republican candidate Donald Trump nor Democratic candidate Hillary

Clinton have signaled any desire to continue down the Obama administration's path with Iran in general. Clinton has vowed to uphold the deal, but neither she nor Trump have made it crystal clear that they will protect the agreement from new congressional sanctions or other measures that would cause the deal's collapse.

Clinton's team has signaled that its priority will be to rebuild relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia and restore those allies' confidence that the United States will counter Iran in the region. Meanwhile, the uncertainty around a Trump presidency needs no explaining. As a result, many banks deem the risk of entering the Iranian market too high due to the political challenges on the U.S. side. That has left Iranians without much in the way of sanctions relief, which is in turn costing Rouhani politically.

In other words, although the deal has been remarkably successful in achieving its explicit goals – halting, and even reversing, Iran's nuclear advances while avoiding a costly and risky war with Tehran – its true value in rebalancing U.S. relationships in the Persian Gulf and creating a broader opening with Iran may be squandered once Obama leaves office. If Obama's successor returns to the United States' old ways in the Middle East while hardliners in Tehran stymie outreach to the West, these unique and historic opportunities will be wasted.

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## Institutionalizing the US-Iran Detente

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have built a personal trust that has enabled diplomacy to begin overcoming decades of distrust, but this promising U.S.-Iranian relationship remains fragile and could disappear once a new president takes office, warn Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis.

By Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis

Doubting the power of diplomacy is like doubting climate change at this point. Despite the skepticism Barack Obama faced in the 2008 elections for his willingness to talk to adversaries – including accusations of naiveté from Democratic and Republican rivals alike, Obama’s diplomacy has now both prevented a disastrous war with Iran and an Iranian nuclear bomb and has secured the release of American prisoners held in Iran.

And much more can be achieved if America stays the course – the question is if it can when so much of this success has been built on specific *personal* relations that have been forged. Since this new budding relationship with Iran has not been institutionalized, what will be left of it when the Obama administration leaves office?

Having established a reliable channel of communication between the two countries for the first time in more than three decades, the Obama administration can explore opportunities that have been unavailable to previous administrations. For Obama – who has long argued that the U.S. should be able “to test the possibility that engagement leads to better outcomes” – sailing into such uncharted waters with Iran affords a ripe opportunity to shape a legacy that is growing by the day.

The challenge is to ensure that these channels of communication are not limited to the personal rapport that has developed between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, but will survive into succeeding administrations. Failing to formalize the channel could not only undermine the very real opportunities that spring forth from such direct U.S.-Iran engagement, but could also implicate the sustainability of the nuclear accord itself.

The most natural step – normalizing relations and reopening embassies – is not in the cards for now. But there are measures the U.S. and Iran can take that could help institutionalize this critical relationship.

Step 1: The U.S. and Iran need to establish a strategic dialogue through regular meetings between their respective government agencies.

This will not be a negotiation between the two, but rather a dialogue on various issues of common concern, though not necessarily of common interest.

The main purpose of this dialogue is to better understand each other’s motives in order to preempt misperceptions and misunderstandings. And of course, if areas of common interest can be found, the dialogue provides an opportunity to explore collaboration on those issues.

In 2003, the Iranians offered a three-step negotiation road map for the U.S. and Iran. One of the suggested measures was a strategic dialogue just of this kind.

The George W. Bush administration ignored the proposal.

Had the Bush administration accepted the invitation for dialogue, the Middle East would likely look very different today. The U.S. and Iran may have collaborated rather than competed with each other in Iraq – as they did in Afghanistan before President Bush included Iran in the Axis of Evil. If they had cooperated, that may have prevented the collapse of the Iraqi state and the spread of sectarianism. The world may never have known the scourge of the so-called Islamic State, and Syria might not have devolved into a civil war seemingly immune to resolution.

Missing that opportunity in 2003 proved tremendously costly for all sides. Missing it after 2016 may prove even costlier.

Step 2: The legislatures of both countries need to establish their own dialogue.

Some of the harshest opposition to improved U.S.-Iran relations is currently concentrated within the U.S. Congress and the Iranian parliament. The only prospect of undoing some of that mistrust is to begin a process of dialogue – just as the nuclear deal began with discreet talks between American and Iranian officials in Oman.

Ideally, this process will eventually lead to congressional delegations visiting Iran and vice versa and provide the legislatures a formal role in the strategic dialogue between the two countries.

Step 3: Perhaps most importantly, there needs to be increased contact and communications between the two societies.

Whether connections between American and Iranian think tanks or non-policy oriented people-to-people exchanges, such activities have been almost nonexistent in the past three decades.

Here, the problem has primarily been on the Iranian side, where the government has viewed such activities with great suspicion. Just in the past months, there has been a crackdown inside Iran on individuals engaged in such bridge-building. For people-to-people contacts to flourish and enable the two societies to rediscover each other, the bridge builders must feel safe.

While the Obama administration has always spoken about diplomacy with Iran as limited and transactional, the events of the past few weeks show this dialogue has the potential to become transformational. But for that to happen, it cannot be limited to Obama and Rouhani or Kerry and Zarif.

True opportunities to start a dialogue between the U.S. and Iran have only

appeared once a decade. Opportunities to change the paradigm of the relationship may only come once a generation.

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**[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/trita-parsi/steps-us-iran-dialogue-future\\_b\\_9019222.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/trita-parsi/steps-us-iran-dialogue-future_b_9019222.html)**

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## Saudi Arabia's Dangerous Decline

Much of Official Washington still toes the Saudi line against Iran in part because Israel shares that hostility but that antagonism is putting the world at greater risk as Saudi Arabia demonstrates increasingly reckless and barbaric behavior, the sign of a declining power, says Trita Parsi.

By Trita Parsi

The escalating tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the story of a declining state desperately seeking to reverse the balance of power shifting in favor of its rising rival.

History teaches us that it is not rising states that tend to be reckless, but declining powers. Rising states have time on their side. They can afford to be patient: They know that they will be stronger tomorrow and, as a result, will be better off postponing any potential confrontation with rivals.

Declining states suffer from the opposite condition: Growing weaker over time, they know that time is not on their side; their power and influence is slipping out of their hands. So they have a double interest in an early crisis: First, their prospects of success in any confrontation will diminish the longer they wait, and second, because of the illusion that a crisis may be their last chance to change the trajectory of their regional influence and their prospects vis-à-vis rivals.

When their rivals, who have the opposite relationship with time, seek to de-escalate and avoid any confrontation, declining states feel they are left with no choice but to instigate a crisis.

Saudi Arabia is exhibiting the psychology of a state that risks losing its dominant position and whose losing hand is growing weaker and weaker. This

explains why an otherwise rational actor begins making seemingly panicky and incomprehensible moves.

From its decision to give up a seat on the United Nations Security Council, after having campaigned for it for over a year and celebrated its election to the UN body only a day earlier, to its reckless and failing attack on Yemen, to its push against the nuclear deal with Iran, to the deliberate provocation of executing Shia political dissident Nimr al-Nimr, its conduct is that of a sun-setting power.

Iran, on the other hand, is by all accounts a rising power. Ironically, much of Iran's rise is not due to its own actions, but must be credited to the reckless mistakes of its adversaries.

The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq eliminated Tehran's primary nemeses to its east (the Taliban in Afghanistan) and its west (the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq). In addition, Iran's own Machiavellian maneuvering also ensured that it, and not the U.S., has become the most influential outside actor in those two.

Even though the Syrian civil war has been very costly to Iran in terms of resources, soft power and standing in the Arab world, Tehran views the survival of its ally, the Bashar al-Assad regime, as reconfirmation of Iran's power and deterrence.

Although Iran cannot be declared a winner of the Arab spring, it has probably lost the least compared to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the U.S. Moreover, the nuclear deal has opened the door for Iran's rehabilitation among the community of nations. Once a pariah in the eyes of many key states, Iran exercises power and influence in the region that is now increasingly accepted.

Furthermore, the European Union has made no secret that it views the nuclear deal as a first step towards a broader rapprochement with Iran and recognizes that the international community must work with Iran in order for it to be a force for stability.

In fact, the EU's support for reengagement with Iran is partly driven by its assessment that the West's current relationship with Saudi Arabia isn't sustainable. As the New York Times has reported, in the current standoff between Saudi Arabia and Iran, EU sympathies tend to lean toward Tehran.

To make matters worse for the Saudis, the Chinese have shifted their position in the Persian Gulf to reduce their dependency on Saudi Arabia and strengthen their ties with Iran.

“China wants stability in the Persian Gulf,” an analyst close the Chinese government recently told me, “and it sees Iran as the most stable country in the region, while it is very worried about Saudi conduct.”

Yet, despite all of these windfalls for Iran, it is not yet acting singularly as a rising power. The patience and prudence characteristic of rising states whose path for greater influence and role has been paved by the international community’s approval, certainly was not on display when a crowd of angry protesters attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and torched it while Iranian police largely stood by and watched.

There’s a duality in Iran’s conduct. There’s the more mature and prudent approach lead by President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. Their leadership gave much of the international community hope that Iran can act as a responsible rising power.

But there is also a reactionary and intransigent segment led by a powerful minority of hardliners who see their own power protected through Iran’s continued isolation and conflict with the outside world. Their conduct is more reminiscent of a declining, anti-status quo power.

This internal tension does not bode well for the region or for Iran. The international community’s willingness to bet that a more powerful Iran will be a more responsible and prudent Iran is contingent upon this contradictory behavior coming to an end.

The Rouhani government appears to recognize this. The Iranian president quickly condemned the attack on the embassy and called it “totally unjustified.” But perhaps more importantly, conservative voices have also come out and blasted the attack. Brigadier General Mohsen Kazemini of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps condemned the torching of the embassy as “totally wrong” and as an “ugly, unjustifiable act.”

It took almost a year before hardliners in Iran grudgingly admitted that the 2011 sacking of the British embassy was wrong. But for the first time now, hardliners are paying a price and facing resistance almost immediately after committing a transgression of international norms and law.

But for Iran to rise as geopolitical stars align in its favor, condemnations after a transgression is not enough. “Totally unjustified” acts must be prevented, not just denounced. The region simply cannot afford having both of its leading powers acting like declining states.

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<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/1/the-power-logic-behind-riyadh-s-move-s.html>

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## Saudi Arabia's Gruesome Provocation

Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent political leader of the monarchy's Shiite minority has worsened Mideast tensions and is forcing the Obama administration to decide if there are any limits to the outrages that the longtime U.S. "ally" may commit, as Trita Parsi explains.

By Trita Parsi

There should be little doubt that Saudi Arabia wanted to escalate regional tensions into a crisis by executing Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. On the same day, Riyadh also unilaterally withdrew from the ceasefire agreement in Yemen.

By allowing protesters to torch the Saudi embassy in Tehran in response, Iran seems to have walked right into the Saudi trap. If Saudi Arabia succeeds in forcing the United States into the conflict by siding with the kingdom, then its objectives will have been met.

It is difficult to see that Saudi Arabia did not know that its decision to execute Nimr would not cause uproar in the region and wouldn't put additional strains on its already tense relations with Iran. The inexcusable torching of the Saudi embassy in Iran, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani condemned it and called it "totally unjustifiable," though footage shows that Iranian security forces did little to prevent the attack, in turn provided Riyadh with the perfect pretext to cut diplomatic ties with Tehran. With that, Riyadh significantly undermined U.S.-led regional diplomacy on both Syria and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has long opposed diplomatic initiatives that Iran participated in be it in Syria or on the nuclear issue and that risked normalizing Tehran's regional role and influence.

Earlier, Riyadh had successfully ensured Iran's exclusion from Syria talks in Geneva by threatening to boycott them if Iran was present, U.S. officials have told me. In fact, according to White House sources, President Barack Obama had to personally call King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to force the Saudis to take part in the Vienna talks on Syria this past fall.

Now, by having cut its diplomatic relations with Iran, the Saudis have the perfect excuse to slow down, undermine and possibly completely scuttle these U.S.-led negotiations, if they should choose to do so.

From the Saudi perspective, geopolitical trends in the region have gone against its interests for more than a decade now. The rise of Iran and Washington's decision to negotiate and compromise with Tehran over its nuclear program has only added to the Saudi panic.

To follow through on this way of thinking, Riyadh's calculation with the deliberate provocation of executing Nimr may have been to manufacture a crisis, perhaps even war, that it hopes can change the geopolitical trajectory of the region back to the Saudi's advantage.

The prize would be to force the United States to side with Saudi Arabia and thwart its slow but critical warm-up in relations with Tehran. As a person close to the Saudi government told the Wall Street Journal: "At some point, the U.S. may be forced to take sides [between Saudi Arabia and Iran] This could potentially threaten the nuclear deal."

Washington should not repeat Tehran's mistake and walk into this Saudi trap. In fact, from the U.S. perspective, Saudi Arabia's destabilizing activities are a vindication of the nuclear deal it struck with Iran in 2015. One critical benefit of that deal, left unstated by Obama administration officials, is that it helped reduce U.S. dependency on Saudi Arabia.

By resolving the nuclear standoff and getting back on talking terms with Iran, Washington increased its options in the region.

As Admiral Mike Mullen wrote in Politico last year in regards to the benefits of the nuclear deal: "It would also more fairly rebalance American influence. We need to re-examine all of the relationships we enjoy in the region, relationships primarily with Sunni-dominated nations. Detente with Iran might better balance our efforts across the sectarian divide."

Mindful of the deliberate manner Saudi Arabia is driving matters towards a crisis in the region partly motivated by a desire to trap the United States in Riyadh's own enmity with Iran Washington is clearly better off being able to play a balancing role between Saudi Arabia and Iran rather than being obligated to fully support Saudi Arabia's regional escapades.

The question is, however, if Washington's desire to stay out of this fight is tenable. Obama administration officials have already expressed concern over how this Saudi-initiated crisis is affecting the fight against Islamic State, also known as ISIS and ISIL, and diplomacy over Syria.

“This is a dangerous game [the Saudis] are playing,” an unnamed U.S. official told the Washington Post. “There are larger repercussions than just the reaction to these executions,” including damage to counter-ISIL initiatives as well as the Syrian peace process.

If Washington’s priority is the defeat of the Islamic State and other jihadist movements, then a balancing act between an Iran that ferociously opposes the Islamic State and a Saudi Arabia that has played an undeniable role in promoting jihadi extremism may not be the right answer.

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