

IS IT TIME FOR THE UNITED STATES TO CRAFT A NEW IRANIAN & MIDDLE EAST SECURITY STRATEGY?

Crafting a new Middle East security policy is a daunting task. However, despite the war in Syria, the missile threats from Hamas and Hezbollah, the ongoing terrorist violence in Iraq, and the conflict in Yemen, 2017 may be, ironically, a particularly propitious time for US security policy to move in a different direction-- while also preserving what is right about US policy and changing what is wrong.

Iran's hostile behavior is of a long standing nature, having been initiated in 1979 and continued through this past decade. It is not new and is not a reaction to bad American actions. It is rooted in the very nature of the Iranian regime. Unless we face that reality, our efforts to eliminate Iran's pursuit of both nuclear weapons and a hegemonic role in the Middle East will be for naught.

We start with 1979, the fall of the Shah and the installation of the Iranian Islamic Republic. This was just a year after the September 1978 Camp David accords which brought relative normality between Egypt and Israel and which at the time was thought to be a harbinger of future Middle East peace.

What we missed was that the Iranian mullahs were no "men of the cloth" as they were characterized by the Carter administration. The mullahs were dedicated to a revolutionary, conquering Islam.

Terrorism was one of their primary tools to achieve an Iranian dominance of not only the Gulf States but the Islamic world. Their top goals: the destruction of Israel and the United States, characterized repeatedly as the "Big" and "Little Satan".

That is the central threat we face in the Middle East. The threat is not just a nuclear armed Iran, deadly as that would be. But an Iranian Islamic revolutionary regime, **eventually** armed with nuclear weapons, seeking control of the source of some 70% of the conventional reserves of oil and gas in the world.

Even should Iran not build nuclear weapons over the entire lifetime of the JPCOA, Iran will in the meantime become more conventionally dangerous. Its offensive missile capability, already the largest in the Gulf region, is markedly improving, as is its ability to interdict shipping in the Gulf region, on top of its financial and weaponry support for other terrorist groups and regimes.

It is perfectly reasonable to ask why the situation today in the Middle East should give one hope that progress could be made toward a better American relationship with the region.

I start with six reasons.

First, the United States and Israeli relations are at a new, hopeful and cooperative state for the first time in nearly a decade.

Second, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Egypt, the two most important countries in the Arab world, are seeking to form an alliance with the United States against Iran and its associated terrorism.

Third, there is a growing and bi-partisan understanding in Washington that Iran, in alliance with Syria, Russia and China, is in the process of establishing a dangerous crescent of influence from Tehran to Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut.

Fourth, even more worrisome, Iran has shadowy relations with tyrannical countries such as North Korea and Venezuela. North Korea can supply missile and weapons technology, becoming a back door through which Iran can avoid economic and trade sanctions. And Venezuela has been supplying cheap oil to sway elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua, for example, which once turned toward tyranny, are becoming bases for Iranian terrorist cells.

Fifth, particularly bad is Iran is seeking more sophisticated and more capable ballistic missiles of all kinds. They currently have technology that allows them to accurately target oil facilities in the Gulf region, as well as military airfields and Navy bases in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, respectively.

These facilities are both critical to the military capability of America's allies in the region, and they facilitate the supply of fossil fuel energy to the industrialized world. Iran is targeting them for a reason. As missile expert Uzi Rubin explains, Iran's missiles now have real military value as opposed to being simply random terror weapons.

Sixth, Iran continues to seek an expansion of its terrorist reach including overthrowing the current government in Yemen. There it is aiding the Houthi rebels with shipments of sophisticated weaponry including missiles of increasing range. Iran seeks a Yemeni base from which it can threaten to attack the Gulf

commercial shipping lines, through which 70% of all the oil traded internationally travels every day.

With a Yemeni based added to its portfolio, Iran can not only target the major KSA oil facilities on the western edge of the Gulf but the oil facilities near the Red Sea. Yemen also serves as a springboard from which to attack the Saudi Kingdom.

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran has killed and maimed more Americans than any other foreign power or terrorist adversary. They have attacked our African embassies, our Marine barracks, our Air Force Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001.

In addition, since 2001, Iran has directed through their Iraqi Shi'ite militias, IRGC elements and Qods forces, scores of attacks on American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. These IED attacks per the United States military have themselves maimed or killed over a thousand American servicemen and women.

Such attacks on Americans would full justify the U.S. taking punishing action against Iran, but we have largely failed to do so.

One tact that was taken involved legislation known as JASTA, the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act. Last fall, JASTA was approved that allowed Americans to sue state sponsors of terror in American courts. Whatever its merits as a private judicial means to redress acknowledged grievances by victims of terror, it is a wholly inadequate strategy for dealing with state sponsors of terror such as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The government of Iran and Iranian business entities such as the Revolutionary Guard Corps have few if any assets in the United States that courts could attach. Nor do their terrorist affiliates, whether Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Abu Sayef or the other individual sleeper cells that Iran has created in this hemisphere.

Suing Iran in Federal court, a possible creative use of the judicial system, probably cannot bring compensation to the victims of Iranian terrorism, nor prevent further attacks. In short, without assets within the United States that can be attached and taken from the Islamic Republic of Iran, suing Iran may put the record straight but may not stop further Iran aggression.

Similarly, suing Saudi Arabia (KSA)—the target of JASTA-- opens-up our own government to myriad lawsuits from those opposed to US military deployments.

And the KSA could withdraw their assets from the United States to prevent them from being targeted. That in turn would be counter-productive just as the United States pursues the creation of an effective coalition of pro-US Gulf forces which includes KSA.

In addition, already we have seen lawsuits mimicking JASTA and filed in myriad courts elsewhere, targeting American and allied soldiers who have taken part in taking down Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. While most Americans see such use of military force as legitimate, others who oppose the use of American military power are perfectly free to sue Americans in foreign courts and they can point to the JASTA legislation as the model they are emulating.

Better policy options for dealing with Iran are available to the United States. I envision combining current policy initiatives already put forward by the new administration into a counter-Iran security policy. This would go beyond the JCPOA and not focus on Iran largely through the prism of its nuclear weapons ambitions but through its larger geostrategic goals.

To get to such a policy, we have to better understand what in fact the goals of the Iranian Islamic Republic, why the pursuit of nuclear weapons remains its central future objective and its support for terrorism and attacks against the U.S. That we will explore in part two of this three-part essay.

PART II: HISTORY OF US-IRAN RELATIONS POINTS TO BAD END GAME.

1979 is a key date in the US relations with the Middle East. It was the historical hinge upon which much of today's Middle East conflicts rest. The terrorist Islamic Republic was established, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and the Islamic shrines in Saudi Arabia were attacked. The following year Saddam Hussein, after having seized full power in Iraq, invaded Iran.

In the decade that followed, Hezbollah was established, hostages from a variety of western nations were seized by Iranian allied terrorists, and serial terrorism emerged as the preferred tool of statecraft of among others, Iran, Syria, North Korea, Libya, and the Soviet Union.

In 1981, Clare Sterling, in her book "The Terror Network", echoed by Secretary of State Alexander Haig in Congressional testimony, laid out the threat we faced. In 1985, Uri Ra'an of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy published "Hydra of Carnage" further laying out the terrorist threats the United States faced. Understandably, America's attention was largely elsewhere, devoted to ending the Soviet Empire and the aggressive pursuit by Moscow of its objectives.

But even as the Reagan and Bush administrations heroically brought an end to the Cold War, an equally evil force was growing out of Tehran.

After the end of the Cold War, the academic and media conventional wisdom was that it was the end of history. We were told repeatedly that no totalitarian power would threaten liberal democracy again.

But no such peace emerged. The CIA and WTC were attacked in early 1993; then in 1996 the Khobar towers; then in 1998 our embassies in Africa followed by the USS Cole in 2000; and culminating in the 9-11 attacks in New York and Virginia, (and the first heroic counter action over Pennsylvania.) In fact, over the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, major Islamic terror attacks increased four-fold to 44 compared to 10 the previous decade.

Here the media, academia, Hollywood and the government fell down on the job. Fascinated with the persona of Osama bin Laden many U.S. analysts tended to associate terror with the leader of Al Qaeda, failing to understand that Al Qaeda itself was an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, (a group that should be placed on the list of official terrorist organizations), and that most terror attacks against the United States from 1979 to 2001 were perpetrated by Iran, not Al Qaeda.

But it was easier, and intellectually lazy and politically convenient (and in error) to see in Al Qaeda the mujahedeen we supported in the Afghan fight against the Soviets. Just as they fought the Soviets, it was now thought the mujahedeen now switched to fighting the United States.

In his famous declaration of war against the United States published in 1998, Osama Bin Laden specifically laid out the motives for the 9-11 attacks. The United States, contrary to Islamic law, had stationed American troops in Saudi Arabia in preparation for liberating Kuwait. And thus was enough of a “legitimate grievance” to propel the attacks of 9-11.

But Al Qaeda was formed after the Soviets left Afghanistan. Osama Bin Laden actually fled Afghanistan during the civil war that brought the Taliban to power, the Taliban itself a creation of the Pakistani ISI. Both were part of an Islamic mosaic throughout the Middle East seeking the overthrow of apostate Arab governments, the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate, and the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel.

American power was seen as supporting not only Israel but the various Arab governments seen as not sufficiently pious. And the Islamic Revolutionary Republic in Iran simply the most prominent and most dangerous as the Cold War came to an end.

In fact, a close reading of the 911 commission report revealed that Iran and Hezbollah had trained the 9-11 hijackers in Iran. Deliberately avoiding stamping their passports with entry or exit visas, Iran facilitated the hijackers to later obtain American visas through a program known as “Visa Express”, which facilitated their entrance to the United States from Saudi Arabia in 1999, 2000 and 2001.

Even with the death of Osama bin Laden, subsequent terror attacks rose quite dramatically to where in 2015-16 over 10,000 people were killed and wounded in Islamic terror attacks compared to under 3000 in 2001. Worldwide terrorist attacks attributed to Islamic organizations and states dramatically accelerated even though Al Qaeda and the Taliban were seriously degraded.

We did not connect Iran to the national security dots after 9-11 even as agents of Iran maimed and murdered thousands of American soldiers in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan using IEDs strewn along roads on which US forces traveled.

Given this poor track record of checking Iranian power, you would think American national security policy would focus on removing the mullahs from power in Iran. Or at the very least punishing them for their murderous campaign against the United States.

Instead the focus of American policy over the past decade has been on limiting or curtailing (as it turned out temporarily) Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. Its regional and global ambitions, and its long record of attacking the United States, including its role in 9-11, have been put aside.

Ironically, the 9-11 commission obliquely linked only one other country with the 9-11 attacks and that was the KSA. Although claiming there was no evidence of such involvement, they noted the existence of a classified congressional draft report alleging KSA involvement that they made part of the record. The result of which was attention was deflected from the real threat in the Gulf which was Iran. This in large part was how the JASTA legislation was formed and why its focus remained on the KSA and not Iran.

One could argue that given the relative threats from Iran, stopping its pursuit of nuclear weapons should be of the highest priority. However, the American effort to curtail the Iran nuke program (but not its missiles or terrorist support or human rights atrocities) went through several phases not all of which were helpful to America's security.

The first phase involved the US intelligence community almost universally dismissing the idea that the Iranians were seeking or had the capability to produce a nuclear weapon anytime in the immediate future.

This led to the absurd situation where a key American ally, Israel, would warn that Iran was for example a "year" away from producing fuel sufficient for a nuclear weapon. The US intelligence community and their media allies would subsequently dismiss such concerns. They would claim there was no proof that this was the case. At worst we were told Iran was probably a decade away from any such capability but that for certain the Iranian leadership had "made no decision to build a nuclear weapon".

The second phase involved a 2007 national intelligence estimate. The US intelligence community said Iran had in 2003 halted work on the design of nuclear warheads. The accompany press release said Iran had stopped all its nuclear work, a false narrative the intelligence report authors were happy to repeat. In this way it

could appear Iran no longer was pursuing nuclear weapons or their components, even though the reality was Iran was accelerating its capability of producing nuclear weapons fuel, irrespective of whether or not it had or had not stopped work on warhead designs.

The 2007 Iran NIE had the unfortunate effect of taking Iran's nuclear threat off the national security table. The 2008 Presidential campaign was largely devoid of concern over Iran. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative was to get quickly out of the bad war in Iraq and at best finish the "good" war in Afghanistan. Iran was not on the table.

From 2009-15, in phase three, we spent our time inexplicably appeasing Iran. We gave the back of our hand to the Iranian Green Revolution. We took down the planned missile defenses in Europe in the Czech Republic and Poland designed to defend against Iran missiles. We quarreled incessantly with the Israelis over whether Iran was or was not a year, six months or a decade away from a nuclear capability. And we were horribly silent about Iranian murders of USA servicemen and women in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And the intelligentsia praised books such as Kinzer's "All the Shahs Men" that wove a particularly false tapestry of supposed bad American actions against Iran, especially an alleged "coup" in 1953 against then Prime Minister Mossaddegh. Kinzer claims the "coup" led eventually to the fall of the Shah, the rise of Islamic jihad in Iran and the terrorism that led to the attacks of 9-11.

Many in the government encouraged such thinking as it deflected attempts to shine a light on Iranian ambitions, growing Iranian military power and the ongoing Iranian attacks on America's soldiers. It also fed into the false narrative that the 9-11 attacks specifically and terror attacks in general were "America's chickens coming home to roost". In short, it was America's fault we were being attacked, and attacked by terrorists with legitimate grievances.

On top of which the administration fought Congressional attempts to heighten economic sanctions on Iran, arguing conciliation, dialogue and what was described as soft power would get things done as opposed to harsh actions, tougher sanctions and "hard power".

However the role of sanctions and the Iranian calculation on going forward with their own version of the JCPOA is still not clear.

Additional sanctions are being pushed as the best way forward to pressure Iran to change its rogue behavior. But the idea that sanctions led to the JCPOA has another twist to it.

Could it be the Iranians used our perception of the damage sanctions were doing to Iran to convince us that's why the Iranian government came to the table? What if instead the Iranians were engaging in a bit of geostrategic jiu-jitsu? Iran let us assume the country was on its back economically—but they used such a perception to get *us* to the table, to support the removal of sanctions, the unfreezing of funds and in turn get international blessing for its overt nuclear weapons program and ballistic missiles, while continuing to leave largely untouched its terrorist enterprises. On top of which, the JCPOA curtailment of its nuclear enrichment capabilities is only temporary and will eventually expire.

That is an end game we have to avoid. Only a new American Middle East Security Policy will get us there. That new policy we address in part three.

PART III: AVOIDING A NUCLEAR IRAN OPTIONS FOR A NEW MIDDLE EAST SECURITY POLICY

The most important issue facing US Middle East policy is Iran and whether it will be a nuclear armed state. It should be understood, the threats from Hamas and Hezbollah to Israel, the potential continued spread of ISIS, the war in Syria, the continued conflict in Iraq, the civil war in Yemen, and the counter-insurgency in Afghanistan all involve Iran to one extent or the other.

And with nuclear weapons, Iran makes all of these problems worse. These weapons would establish Iran as the dominant power in the region, with implications for regional security, the free flow of oil from the Gulf, the future of American allies in the area, and in particular the very survival of Israel. But even without nuclear weapons, the instability has cost the US trillions of dollars and thousands of lives.

A dominant assumption is that the current post JCPOA phase of dealing with the Iranian nuclear program has successfully achieved America's objective of shuttering the mullah's search for the bomb. At one recent CSIS forum on missile defense, an analyst said the "Iranian nuclear problem is solved".

Is it indeed?

An honest appraisal of the JCPOA would conclude we have hit a pause button on some admittedly key aspects of the Iranian nuclear program and that is how much fuel the Iranians can enrich and to what level.

But the deal unfortunately leaves intact the centrifuges, the hidden nuclear laboratories where military related work has been done, the ballistic missile programs which could in the future deliver nuclear warheads, the network of terrorist organizations through which a nuclear warhead could be delivered, and the ongoing cooperative work on ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons with North Korea that have the potential of circumventing the JCPOA.

Even more worrisome is that the elimination of significant economic sanctions against Iran is turning out to be extremely difficult to reinstate or reverse, making the threat of re-installing such actions appear hollow even if down the road we discover serious Iranian violations of the JPCOA.

As we now know, following the “adoption” of the JCPOA, Iran’s ballistic missile developments, terrorist activities, military campaigns and human rights violations have continue apace, even worsened. Apparently, what JCPOA supporters are asking us to do is to put aside these dangers while assuming Iran’s admitted weak adherence to the terms of the JCPOA will suffice to protect us.

That is a strategy that could be self-defeating.

As Iran develops its ballistic missiles and terrorist organizations, it is also improving the capability to produce nuclear weapons fuel as its centrifuges will be more capable and modern. Although they cannot enrich sufficient quantities of nuclear weapons fuel to make a weapon, as the current nuclear agreement prevents them from doing, they can even under the current agreement eventually produce whatever nuclear weapons fuel they wish.

In fact, during the ensuing period prior to the end of the agreement, the Iranian nuclear weapons fuel making infrastructure will become industrial-strength per General Michael Hayden, the previous director of national intelligence.

Iran gets to keep all its thousands of centrifuges, even as it gets assistance in building much more advanced centrifuge systems. This enables it in the final analysis to produce more weapons grade fuel sooner then they could when the JCPOA was signed.

Why not follow the Libyan example and have all centrifuges removed from Iran? What has Iran done to merit any more trust then we gave Gadhafi at the time of the Libyan 2006 agreement? And why do we have to advance their centrifuge capability when that very activity is what we are trying to prevent in the first place?

Particularly unsettling is the absence of information about the side agreements between the Islamic Republic and the United Nations, and between the Islamic Republic and the United States.

In the secret side agreements that have been revealed to date, we have learned that the economic sanctions on key banks in the Islamic Republic have been removed long prior to the date established in the nuclear agreement.

We know that areas of nuclear weapons work in the Islamic Republic will remain off-limits to international inspection. And significant inspections will be done by

the Islamic Republic itself and not by trained United Nations inspectors. And the United States and other parties to the agreement are required under the JCPOA to assist the Iranian Islamic Republic in the development of more advanced centrifuges for the enrichment of nuclear weapons fuel-- without limit.

Thus we are left in a quandary of seeking on the one hand to enforce strictly a weak and inadequate deal or jettison the deal and see even the limited boundaries around Iran's nuclear weapons program be undone.

So what is the alternative?

This question of course then runs us right back to the beginning of our essay laid out in part one.

Are there reasonable grounds to believe that the time is ripe for the United States and its Middle Eastern allies to put together a new, but sound, positive, and effective Middle East regional security policy? And which would have as its core an option the US and its allies should assess: the elimination of the Iranian Revolutionary Islamic thirst for violent jihad (found in the Iranian constitution) and a complete end to its nuclear weapons and its ballistic missiles. And would not such an objective require nothing less than the elimination of the current regime?

In pursuit of such a policy, here are some options we might consider, some of which have already been adopted or are in the process of being adopted.

First, Israel and the United States can jettison the fiction of both the “peace process” and a two-state solution. This can free the Arab neighbors of Israel to put together an alliance and coalition to defeat ISIS, the rebels in Yemen as well as checkmate Iran.

Second, instead of removing missile defenses in Eastern Europe, as was done in 2009, the new administration can deploy new missile defense systems in Poland and Romania, just as we work with our Gulf allies to deploy better missile defense systems in that region.

Third, fatally flawed legal maneuvers such as JASTA as a tool for bringing a resolution to the 9-11 attacks can hopefully be amended to prevent lawsuits against American servicemen and women which are now starting to emerge.

Fourth, the Proliferation Security Initiative could be expanded to interdict the trafficking in missile technology between Iran and the DPRK and weapons from Iran to the Houthis rebels in Syria.

Fifth, an embargo on refined oil products being shipped to Iran could also be put on the table. When combined with US success in dramatically increase our own oil and natural gas production, such a tool of statecraft becomes more realistic. Especially in light of the reported \$170 billion in foreign investment in oil, gas and refinery projects now ready to take hold in the United States.

Sixth, a serious initiative to take down and freeze the financial assets of Iran, its ally North Korea and their terror group friends could go a long way to slow Iran's march toward regional hegemony.

Seventh, the administration wants to have stronger border and visa enforcement. That would help thwart the kind of terrorist attacks Iran threatened against the Ambassadors from the KSA and Israel.

Eighth, the administration has a 30 day plan to destroy IS but have also examined how to do so without empowering Iran. Certainly eliminating these mass murderers would free up resources then capable of dealing with Iran.

Ninth, already the administration has called for \$54 billion in new defense spending as well as a related ballistic missile defense review. Both can result in added resources and technology being available to defeat Iranian aggression, particularly deploying advanced missile defenses to the Persian Gulf, northwest Asia and the US homeland.

Using all these elements in a combined strategy, they can be all crafted as a means to help implement and make successful a new American Middle Eastern strategy. Such a strategy could have a greater chance of success than current policy.

Our strategic goal should be the end of any future nuclear armed Iran, (the ostensible objective of the JCPOA) but the end of the revolutionary jihadi regime in Tehran itself.

A more capable armed Iran in the long run--- with better conventional weapons, more dangerous and capable ballistic missiles and an expanded terror network with which to attack us--should not be the "price we have to pay" to keep the JCPOA in the short run.

Unlike the past some 37 years of US security policy, a new national security strategy on Iran has to squarely face the true nature of the regime. Imbedded in its constitution is its call for revolutionary political Islam. And for the use of whatever violent tools it can obtain to achieve such ends including nuclear weapons.

It was not enough to reduce dramatically the Soviet era nuclear weapons, although that was achieved through the INF and Start treaties. The objective of ending the Soviet empire remained the focus of American security policy.

So, too, should American policy on Iran be focused on ending the regimes quest for Islamic conquest and regional hegemony, and its war against the “Big and Little Satan.”

If we do not, we will have only delayed not ended the emergence of Iran as a full-fledged, nuclear armed, revolutionary Islamic state, dedicated to our destruction and armed with the most awful weapons every invented.