

Dispelling the Iranian Terrorism Myth

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Some ideas take on a character akin to sacred texts whose validity is rarely questioned. One such belief is that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the biggest threat to the Middle East and the United States. The threat narrative has become required foreign policy catechism in Washington, D.C.

Menacing stereotypes and bellicose rhetoric are the standards by which Iran has come to be judged. It has been in the crosshairs of American administrations since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The process by which a country is determined a terrorist state is highly subjective and politicized, with the United States assuming the singular role of terrorism arbiter. After only weeks in office, the Trump administration resurrected the “Iran the terrorist state” mantra.

The unpredictability of the Trump White House and volatility of the Middle East makes it vital to understand the nature of Washington’s anti-Iran bias, how and why Iran has come to be cast as an international sponsor of terrorism, and most importantly, examine why the characterization is false.

The 1979 revolution freed Iran from its obsequious relationship to Washington. Its regional influence spread not in terms of conquered territory; rather, its revolutionary ideology gave voice to Shi’ites living in oppressive Sunni majority-ruled countries.

The Islamic Republic presented a dilemma for Washington, accustomed to dealing with Middle East autocrats. To counter the revolution’s influence, Washington manufactured a narrative depicting Iran’s leaders as irrational religious fanatics in charge of a dangerous state that acted contrary to traditional state behavior. America’s attitude hardened with the takeover of the U.S. embassy in 1979, shaping the negative lens through which Iran would be viewed thereafter.

The trauma inflicted by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) deepened Iran’s distrust of Washington. America’s support for Saddam’s aggression was seen as an attempt to restore the monarchy and to destabilize the nascent government. The post-revolution 1980s were filled with uncertainties and excesses as Tehran struggled to survive its war with Iraq – a war subsidized by Saudi Arabia and supported by the United States.

In the 1990s, Iran endeavored to shed its hard-line image, favoring integration into the international community. Tehran sought to build constructive ties to the West. Although Iran opposed the attack on Afghanistan in 2001, the goal of fighting terrorism and toppling the Taliban regime – driven from power in November 2001 – united the two countries in perhaps the most constructive period of U.S.-Iranian diplomacy.



General Colin Powell, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, waves from his motorcade during the Persian Gulf War Welcome Home Parade in New York City. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

At a December 2001 meeting in Bonn, Germany, Secretary of State Colin Powell credited Iran with being particularly helpful in establishing an interim Afghan government, following the American invasion. It was Javad Zarif, then Iran's U.N. ambassador, who mediated a compromise over the composition of Afghanistan's post-Taliban government, ultimately leading to an agreement. And it was Iran that insisted that the agreement include a commitment to hold democratic elections in Afghanistan.

A burst of diplomatic talks between Iranian and American officials took place from 2001 through May 2003. Topics included cooperative activities against their mutual enemies: Saddam, the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Meetings resumed even after President George W. Bush listed Iran among the "axis of evil" countries in his 2002 State of the Union address.

Tehran's final attempt to normalize relations with the United States came in May of 2003 in what became known as the "grand bargain." Calling for broad dialogue "in mutual respect," Iran suggested that everything was on the table, including full cooperation on Iran's nuclear program, and assistance in helping stabilize Iraq.

Convinced that the Iranian government was on the brink of collapse, and emboldened by its perceived victory in Iraq in March 2003, Bush administration officials belittled the initiative.

Washington's imperious posture and failure to build on Iran's cooperation in Afghanistan, led senior officials in Tehran to conclude that America's goal was regime change.

Bush strategists had another objective in ousting Saddam - to isolate and increase the military and political pressure on Iran, and on the government of President Bashar al-Assad. A frequent refrain of administration officials was, "Today Baghdad, tomorrow Damascus, and then on to Tehran."

To curb Tehran's growing influence in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, Bush launched an unprecedented financial war against Iran. A list of strategies developed in 2006 by Stuart Levy – the first undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the Treasury Department – were implemented to drive Iran out of the global economy.

Congress defines an international sponsor of terrorism as a country whose government supports acts of international terrorism. Tehran does not support “international” terrorism, but it does provide material support to regional movements that it calls the oppressed, whose battle is directed toward the state of Israel – Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. These groups have used violence against Israel to end the brutal occupation of their land, and Tehran insists it is not terrorism.

Iran's leaders believe that Israel's long-term goal is to weaken the Islamic world, eliminating all resistance, in order to carry out its expansionist designs. The Israeli government has relentlessly pushed the idea that Iran is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the region and world. It has successfully sold this provocative idea in the United States. Many senior Israeli security officials have refuted the assertion that an Iranian nuclear weapon would threaten Israel, fully aware that Israel enjoys a huge military and technical advantage in the region, and that it possesses an arsenal capable of deterring any nuclear aggression.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's motives for vilifying Iran are many, but it serves to distract international attention as his government continues settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, Jerusalem and Syrian Golan Heights.

Saudi Arabia, like Israel, has been relentless in insuring that the United States remains engaged in the Middle East, and that the United States continues to do its heavy lifting. Saudi rulers believe that the Assad government is pivotal to Iranian influence in the region, and have been encouraging Washington to get rid of him for years.

The intense focus on Iran as a menace does not correspond to its capabilities, intent or danger. A 2017 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report stated that Iran's national security policy involves protecting itself from American or others' efforts to intimidate or change the regime. According to the 2014 U.S. Defense Department Annual Review of Iran, “Iran's military doctrine is defensive.”

Forty-five US military bases encircle Iran, with over 125,000 troops in close proximity. The CRS asserted that Tehran allocates about 3 percent of GDP to military spending, far less than what its Persian Gulf neighbors spend.

Iran's nuclear program has cultivated scientific innovation and national pride. It required pragmatic leadership to accept the constraints of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement subjects Iran to greater restrictions and more intrusive monitoring than any state with nuclear programs – while its neighbors, Pakistan and Israel, possess unlimited nuclear programs and weapons. According to the IAEA and the US State Department, Iran has been fulfilling its obligations under the JCPOA.

Toughness on Iran has become a litmus test for American politicians to demonstrate their support for Israel. Congress overwhelmingly passed a ten-year extension of the Iran Sanctions Act, which expired on December 31, 2016. The renewal makes it easier for the Trump administration to reimpose sanctions that President Obama lifted under the JCPOA.

Unlike other countries in the Middle East that have integrated missiles into their conventional armed forces, Iran has been singled out for the same behavior. It has no long-range missiles, no nuclear warheads for its missiles, and has not threatened their use. Without nuclear weapons, missiles are of negligible importance. Unlike the Saudis and Israelis, Iran does not have a large or modern air force.

A February 26, 2015, report by the director of national intelligence, titled "*Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Communities*," stated that Iran is not the chief sponsor of terrorism, and removed Iran and Hezbollah from its list of terrorism threats. The report asserted Tehran's intentions are to "dampen sectarianism, build responsive partners and de-escalate tensions with Saudi Arabia..., and combat Sunni extremists, including the Islamic State."

Yet there are countless examples of aggression against Iran. The Saudi government has sought for decades to motivate Sunnis to fear and resist Iran. To that end, it has spent billions on a campaign to expand Salafism (an ultra-conservative, austere form of Islam) as a major counterforce in the Muslim world.

In 2007, Congress approved Bush's request for \$400 million to escalate covert operations aimed at destabilizing the Islamic Republic, with regime change the ultimate goal. The funding request came at the same time that a National Intelligence Estimate – the collective work of America's sixteen spy agencies – concluded that Iran had ceased its efforts to develop nuclear weapons in 2003.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations employed some of the most draconian financial methods ever used against a state, including crippling sanctions on Iran's entire banking, transportation and energy sectors.

The first known use of cyber warfare against a sovereign state was launched against Iran by the United States and Israel in 2009. The Stuxnet virus crippled Iranian centrifuges used to produce nuclear fuel.

Beginning in 2008, four of Iran's nuclear scientists were assassinated on the streets of Tehran; the evidence pointed to Israeli agents. In 2011, a military arms depot was blown up, killing 17 people. The incident was similar to a blast in October 2010 at an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps missile base in Khorramabad. Both acts of sabotage were attributed to Israel.



Source: [Right Web](#)

American organizations such as the jingoistic United Against a Nuclear Iran, chaired by former Senator Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., have called for attacks on Iranian ships in the Persian Gulf and on Iranian military forces that have been fighting the Islamic State in Syria. They have pressured the Trump administration to increase sanctions and to cancel the JCPOA.

These acts of aggression are justified in Washington and elsewhere by the standard rhetoric of the Iranian terrorism myth, but there is scant intelligence to support the claim. In a 2011 poll conducted in twelve Arab countries by The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 73 percent of the 16,731 individuals surveyed saw Israel and the United States as the most

threatening countries, with 5 percent seeing Iran as such.

Most U.S. officials quietly acknowledge that Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-ruled Gulf monarchies are the major supporters of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. A recently released classified State Department cable dated December 30, 2009, stated, "...donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide."

Iran has been fighting the Islamic State in Iraq at the request of the country's sovereign government. Iran lives in the neighborhood and relies on regional allies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Assad in Syria, to bolster its security if attacked. Syria was the only country to support Iran during the Iraq war. Tehran is keenly aware that the outcome of the Syrian war will have major consequences for the region's Shi'ites, and could reshape the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have made Iran their major regional adversary, and to that end have built a formidable alliance. The Saudis and Israelis, for example, have aided al-Qaeda affiliated forces in the Syrian war.

Israel has pressured the United States and Russia to expel Iranian-backed militias from Syria, and to attack pro-Iranian forces. Tel Aviv would like to see Syria fractured into small, sectarian enclaves, so weakened as to be no threat. To that end, it has partnered with Jabhat al-Nusra (aka the al-Nusra Front) – al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria. United Nations observers have documented the delivery of material aid and coordination between Israeli military personnel and al-Nusra armed groups, and have noted that Al-Nusra terrorists have been cared for in Israeli hospitals.

By supporting al-Nusra, Israel has effectively sided with America's enemy and could, therefore, be labeled a state sponsor of terrorism.

In the wake of the 9-11 attacks, President Bush, in his September 20, 2001, speech to Congress declared,

"Every nation now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists....From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

Iran has been fighting terrorism since September 11, 2001. Its national security depends on stable borders and a stable region. Consequently, it has been fighting in Syria and aiding the Iraqi government to recapture territories held by the Islamic State.

Iranians know all too well the egregious effects of terrorism. For decades, US and Israeli intelligence agencies have covertly financed, equipped and trained opposition groups that have fomented and carried out terrorist attacks inside Iran. Thousands of civilians and political figures, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, have suffered injury at the hands of terrorists. US intelligence agencies have supported the acts of violence committed by the Mujahedin-e Khalq – listed by the State Department as a terrorist group (now delisted) that advocates the overthrow of the Islamic Republic – as well as the Baluchi ethnic minority group Jundullah, aligned with the thinking of al-Qaeda.

Terrorism is a cudgel used to engender fear. And fear, grounded in erroneous information,

can result in destructive government policies, and in the worst case, war. This is especially true of the U.S.-Iran relationship. After almost four decades, Iran and the Middle East have substantially changed, while American policy has not. Iran's evolving and nuanced political system does not fit into Washington's outdated, hegemonic good guy-bad guy worldview.

American, Israeli and Saudi regional objectives depend on the existence of an enemy; and to that aim, Iran's terrorism designation has proven a potent rhetorical weapon. Given the circumstances, Tehran will continue its defensive, cautious strategy while asserting what it sees as its historical role in the region.

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