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Trump Is the Only One Losing Out by Refusing to Certify the Iran Deal

Patrick Cockburn

October 15, 2017

As President Trump withdraws certification of the nuclear agreement with Iran, commentators across the world struggled for words to adequately convey their outrage and contempt. A favourite term to describe Trump is as “a wrecking ball”, but the phrase suggests a sense of direction and capacity to strike a target which Trump does not possess.

The instant that Trump decertifies the deal struck by President Obama in 2015, the US becomes a lesser power and Iran a greater one, because he will confirm the belief that America is led by an egoist motivated by ignorant prejudice. Accusations of mental derangement have always been part of common currency of political abuse, but there is a growing belief among international leaders that in Trump’s case there might be something to it, though they have few ideas about what they should do about this.

Their bemusement is understandable given that the situation is so bizarre. In the past, highly neurotic individuals were most like to gain power as hereditary monarchs, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany being a prime example. Full blown psychoses are less common, though madness of Charles VI of France and Henry VI of England in the late Middle Ages precipitate both countries into civil wars. What is extraordinary about Trump’s all-consuming egomania, or what some call “malignant narcissism”, is that it did not prevent his rise to power.

Iranian leaders may calculate that, short of all-out war, they come out the winner: the US-led coalition of states that once isolated Iran has disintegrating and today it is the US that risks

isolation. Germany, Britain, France, Russia and China and the UN nuclear watchdog all say that Iran has abided by the terms of the agreement. The ability of the US to line up all the other big powers in support of a deal brokered by itself was proof that the US was a superpower; its abandonment will have the opposite effect. As if this was not damaging enough to the US, turning over the whole mess to a dysfunctional Congress only highlights the implosion of US influence in the world.

Suggestions in western capitals that they might paper over the breach with America by disagreeing with Washington over the nuclear deal but supporting US allegations that Iran is trying to destabilise the Middle East do not really work. This demonisation of Iran as the sinister hidden hand in the Middle East is just as misleading and simple-minded as Trump's views on the nuclear weapons deal. Much of what he and his administration says is regurgitation of Saudi and Israeli propaganda which may not even be believed in Riyadh and Tel Aviv.

The relationship between Iran and the US has always been a complex mixture of hostility and cooperation. The antagonism dates from the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, the seizure of US diplomats and embassy in Tehran, and the Iran-Iraq war. But this has also been accompanied by a high degree of de facto – and often covert – cooperation: since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Washington and Tehran have often found themselves sharing the same enemies. Tehran benefited as a regional power in 2001 when the US overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan and again in 2003 with the fall of Saddam Hussein. Iran and the US had a similar interest in preventing Isis and al-Qaeda winning in Syria or Iraq after Isis captured Mosul in 2014.

The US and its allies were always circumspect, when they were not being dishonest, about their cooperation with Tehran in Iraq. After Nouri al-Maliki was chosen as Iraqi PM in 2006, an Iraqi official called me to say that “the Great Satan”, the Iranian term for the US, and “the Axis of Evil”, the US term for Iran, had “come together to give us our new leader.” His successor, Haider al-Abadi, also required endorsement from both Washington and Tehran.

One of the many negative consequences of the election of Trump is that his failings are so glaring that they obscure those of the rest of his administration and other US and international leaders. Hillary Clinton's grasp of the likely consequences of US actions in Iraq, Syria and Libya was always limited. David Cameron and Nicholas Sarkozy happily led the way for Nato to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi with no sensible thoughts about the aftermath. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson won some credit by reportedly calling Trump “a moron”, but he quite untruthfully told the Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javid Zarif that the US-Iranian “relationship has been defined by violence – against us”.

In reality, Iranian strength in the Middle East depends on its position as the leading Shia power and its influence is largely confined to countries with significant Shia communities: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Yemen. The US, Saudi and Israeli picture of Iran, as permanently plotting to destabilise the Middle East, misstates Iranian ambitions and exaggerates their capacity.

So much of what Trump says turns out to be the soon-to-be forgotten tweet of the day, that the impact of decertification is impossible to predict. He denounced President Obama's weakness in Iraq and Syria, but changed US policy has changed very little because the Pentagon largely calls

the shots and he does not know what else to do. A summary of his new approach says the new policy will in future focus “on neutralising the government of Iran’s destabilising influence and constraining its aggression, particularly its support for terrorism and militants”. This could mean that in the future the US will regard anyone opposing Saudi Arabia or its allies as a terrorist or it could mean nothing at all.

The current crisis in the Middle East consists of multiple crises that cross-infect each other. The biggest crisis is with Isis which is facing defeat in Iraq and Syria, but is not quite eliminated. It has lost the war in both countries because it has been under attack from a range of enemies from the US air force to Hezbollah, Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Shia paramilitaries, Syrian army and Russians. These countries and movements may not like each other and may not coordinate their attacks on Isis, but cumulatively they have worn down the jihadis. Isis commanders will hope that the new Trump policy will open up divisions among its numerous enemies enabling it to survive and regenerate itself.

The Iranians are sensibly saying very little, presumably calculating that nothing they do will be quite so damaging to US interests as what Trump is doing. The true destabiliser in the Middle East is not Iran but Trump himself.