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Whose Foreign Policy?

by James A Russell

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Whether we Americans like it or not, there is a profound struggle for control over our nation's foreign policy in the Middle East. Push has finally come to shove, with the unseemly sight of Israeli government officials and AIPAC lobbyists fanning out on Capitol Hill to actively discredit the Obama's administration's attempt to craft a deal with Iran to bring the Islamic Republic's nuclear program back under comprehensive international safeguards. After being supported for decades by tens of billions in American taxpayer dollars, free defense equipment, and unquestioning and limitless political support on countless occasions, Israel has shown its gratitude by biting the hand of its principal benefactor.

All Americans both in and out of government would do well to consider an abiding truth in the standoff with Iran over its nuclear program: there is no military solution to this problem. Iran has the money, technical capability, and the infrastructure to build a nuclear weapon if chooses to do so. Bombing Iran to destroy a nuclear weapons program that the US intelligence community states does not exist only ensures that Iran will eventually build its own bomb. No amount of Israeli or US bombs can alter these essential realities.

The stakes in this struggle or control over our foreign policy couldn't be higher — from both a negative and positive perspective: the future of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime as an instrument to control the spread of nuclear weapons; the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran and a resulting arms race in its already unstable region; and another regional war

putting some combination of Israel, the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council states against Iran and its clients.

Alternatively, an interim deal with Iran as a step towards a comprehensive agreement to limit Iran's program opens up the prospect of a more favorable strategic framework throughout the region and an end to the 34-year undeclared war between the United States and Iran. Such a settlement offers the alluring prospect of a way to lower regional tensions and to cooperatively address the myriad problems faced by the region and the international community in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and elsewhere.

US interests in this situation are clear. Above all, we seek to reinforce the role of the NPT in controlling the spread of nuclear technology and preventing a breakdown in the regime that could lead to an increase in the numbers of nuclear-armed states around the world. It is also in US interests to reduce the prospects for another war in the Gulf and Middle East that it is in no position to prosecute. Like it or not, America's decade of irregular war in Iraq and Afghanistan has emptied the country's coffers and left its military exhausted. The United States does not have enough brigade combat teams to go to war with Iran and it could not bomb the Islamic Republic in perpetuity even if it wanted to like it did with Iraq during the 1990s.

During the Cold War, the United States crafted its foreign policy in ways that furthered and protected the country's interests as well as those of its allies. The general political alliance between the United States and Western Europe took place under the collective defense arrangement of NATO, which in itself provided a consultative mechanism, to iron out differences that lead, for example, to the controversial and difficult decision to deploy additional nuclear weapons to Europe in the 1980s.

In the Middle East, there is no such collective defense arrangement and no organizational consultative mechanism to work out differences. US interests diverge in this matter from its two regional "twin pillars," though for different reasons. Israel's leader Benjamin Netanyahu has staunchly and successfully opposed all attempts at peaceful accommodation with Israel's enemies — aided and abetted by American money and political support. While Israel has legitimate concerns about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, it favors steps that would virtually guarantee that outcome. Netanyahu prefers the politics of confrontation that suit his interests and those of his political supporters on the right-wing of Israeli politics. This approach, however, does not serve American interests.

The case of Saudi Arabia is somewhat different. Like Israel, it relied on the United States for political and military support for a generation to protect what was once a fragile state from its surrounding enemies. In the last decade, however, the commonality of interests between Saudi Arabia and the United States has started to shrink — differences that are now laid bare in our competing approaches to the political changes sweeping the region.

Saudi Arabia now stokes the fires of regional and intra-national discord by playing the destructive sectarian card to mobilize Sunnis against the hated, apostate Shi-ites. In so doing, the regime serves its own interests by mobilizing support against its external enemies and diverting attention from its own corrupt, authoritarian rule. The Saudis want little to do with democracy in

any form and remain uninterested in any accommodation with Iran. Such policies may suit the al-Saud in Riyadh, but they do not serve American interests.

There was a day when there was never a question about whether the United States was capable of going its own way and pursuing policies that primarily served its own interests. To be sure, the fractured domestic political landscape at home has unalterably changed as the Republican lurch to the far right has made it impossible to govern based on a shared vision of what is good for the country. Today, there is no commonly accepted vision of America's national interests as money has poured into our political process, serving the interests of the rich few — leaving most of the rest of the country behind.

Like the Israelis and the Saudis, Republicans today live in an aura of continuous and never-ending conflict and show little interest in accommodation on the many political issues of the day. This landscape combines with a President that has demonstrated little political acuity and adeptness in courageously standing against his political foes at home. Will he fold his tent or stand up to do what's best for our country? Right now, the answer is far from clear.

These factors have combined to produce an unprecedented crisis in the history of our Republic: are we a country that can pursue policies that are good for the country or for a select few? The jury is out.