PolicyWatch 1968

The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran

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August 2, 2012

On July 31, David Crist and Ambassador James Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Crist, a senior historian for the U.S. government and a special advisor to the head of U.S. Central Command, is author of the new book The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran. *Mr. Jeffrey has served as U.S. ambassador to both Iraq and Turkey. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

DAVID CRIST

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the United States and Iran have been engaged in a twilight war involving parallel campaigns of espionage, covert action, and military action.

Although the deep-seated distrust between the two governments has been heightened by the crisis over Tehran's nuclear program, this is only one of many issues dividing them. As a result, even if the two sides are able to resolve the nuclear issue diplomatically, the next major U.S. war will still likely be against Iran. In addition, any conflict sparked by Iranian aggression would likely emerge quickly -- it would be a “come as you are war” involving armed forces already on hand in the region, so the United States would not have the luxury of gradually flowing forces into the area as it has in the past. Therefore, Washington needs to maintain a robust presence in the Persian Gulf region to counter long-term hostilities and confrontations with Iran.

The history of the U.S.-Iran relationship is one of missed opportunities: when one side was ready for a rapprochement, the other was not, and vice versa. On several occasions, Iranian interlocutors offered what some in Washington thought were "grand bargains," but such initiatives were of dubious provenance. In particular, the famous 2003 trial balloon was more likely motivated by Tehran's desire to stall and to avert a possible U.S. invasion, with the idea of opening negotiations and giving the appearance of progress, but without addressing the fundamental divide between the two nations.

Moreover, despite the belief that they would avoid the mistakes of their predecessors, both Democratic and Republican administrations have found themselves grappling with many of the same challenges: searching for elusive Iranian moderates, deciding whether to engage or confront Tehran, clarifying Iranian intentions, and, most important, failing to establish clear consensus in Washington regarding the means and ends of policy toward Iran. Even in the face of clear, profound differences between the two countries, most U.S. administrations have been internally divided regarding their goals in Iran, with some factions seeking to work with the regime in Tehran and others seeking its overthrow. At times, the White House has been unable to decide between these competing views, resulting in policy drift. These internal differences have also repeatedly complicated efforts to bridge differences with Iran.

For example, some in the Carter administration supported a military coup in Tehran, while others wanted to work with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Iranian opposition in order to cut U.S. losses. The result was a policy muddle. President George W. Bush faced a similar predicament in his first term; his administration was hopelessly divided between those who sought to gain Tehran's help in Afghanistan and Iraq, and those who supported regime change. By contrast, the Reagan administration attempted to pursue containment and engagement simultaneously, establishing military ties with Gulf Cooperation Council states and developing war plans for Iran while selling arms to Tehran in order to foster ties with moderates there.

Internal debate about pursuing regime change has also been an enduring aspect of U.S. policy toward Iran. Every administration has looked into this possibility, whether by working with internal or external oppositionists or by unilateral action. In each case, however, Washington was unable to identify organized, viable opposition groups and feared that arming various factions could lead to the Balkanization of Iran. Every administration ultimately concluded that the downside of covert action aimed at regime change outweighed the potential gains.

Furthermore, while they have been loath to admit it, many presidents have benefitted from the policies of their predecessors. Reagan largely continued Carter's policy of strengthening U.S. ties with Arab states in order to contain Iran. Obama benefitted from

Bush's "Iran Action Plan" and continued the latter's efforts to develop a missile defense shield in the Gulf. This underscores the degree to which successive administrations have faced similar challenges in Iran and devised similar solutions.

Finally, the United States has also consistently faltered in the face of Iranian aggression. The 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, the 1996 Khobar Towers attack, the use of Iranian proxy groups to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq, and last year's attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador in Washington were all met with insufficient responses. Iranian leaders see this lack of swift retribution as an invitation to continue proxy warfare against the United States. They know that these actions cross U.S. red lines, and they have maintained a pragmatic approach to testing Washington's temperament -- namely, as long as such strikes go unpunished, the regime will not be forced to reevaluate its approach. Yet whenever the United States does use resolute force against Iran, it yields results. In December 2006, for example, the Bush administration detained Iranian operatives in Iraq, quelling the enthusiasm of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Conversely, the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq -- which Tehran perceived as an American defeat -- has enhanced Iranian influence there.

AMBASSADOR JAMES JEFFREY

Although analyzing the U.S.-Iran relationship in an unbiased fashion is difficult, it is correct to conclude that Tehran has been waging a shadow war against the United States for several decades now. In so doing, it relies on asymmetric tactics, namely, terrorism and the use of proxies. In Iraq, Tehran has played both defense and offense to counter U.S. influence. The regime's objectives are to ensure that no U.S. threat emerges from Iraq and that Shiite parties remain dominant in Baghdad -- though, interestingly enough, Washington and Tehran also have certain complementary interests in Iraq, specifically regarding the country's stability.

How to effectively engage Iran remains a key issue; historically, the United States has not succeeded in this endeavor. American officials continue to argue between containment and regime change, and the incoherence in their approach has negatively affected the U.S.-Iran dynamic. But the larger issue is the competition between rival power centers in Iran, and the lack of agreement regarding their goals vis-a-vis the United States. This complicates the question of which channels U.S. officials should use to communicate with Iran.

The bottom line is that Washington must establish a clear position across administrations, bureaucracies, and U.S. allies regarding Iran, including whether the overarching policy is containment or regime change. Until that is clearly established, U.S. policy toward Iran will be muddled by contradictions, and Tehran will remain confused about Washington's goals. Perhaps most important of all is the fact that Iran fundamentally rejects any notion of a "Pax Americana" for the Middle East -- as long as this is the case, the two countries are condemned to be enemies.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Guive Rosen.

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