

Tillerson's 'Peaceful' Regime Change for Iran: Really? And What Comes Next?

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Articles & Testimony

Efforts by U.S. officials to identify or suggest support for anti-regime "elements" within Iran will only undermine any authenticity these elements previously enjoyed.

At this point in our internecine political discourse, it is increasingly rare for foreign policy stories to survive more than a single news cycle unless they involve Russia. However, a bit earlier this month, an important story was barely a blip on the U.S. radar. In a public congressional hearing, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested that U.S. policy toward Iran would include, among other things, support for "peaceful" regime change. At best, it reflected the inchoate state of the Trump administration's Iran policy; at worst, it reflected an unexpected neo-conservative beachhead in President Trump's nascent Iran policy. Either way, it is likely to trigger an enduring response from the Iranians, who will not distinguish between Tillerson freelancing, free-associating, or previewing U.S. policy toward Iran. The Trump administration must move quickly and decisively to clarify its policy toward Iran, both to the American people and to the international community.

The Tree that Fell in the Woods

Secretary Tillerson, responding to a question from a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee about the U.S. position regarding regime change in Iran, said, "Our policy towards Iran is to push back on [its regional] hegemony, contain their ability to develop, obviously, nuclear weapons and to work towards support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government." It is that very last clause, which invokes not just *regime change* but one that is internally rooted and supported by *external forces*. Tillerson went on to say, "Those elements are there certainly, as we know."

Tillerson's written submission did not include any of this language. Instead, it said, "The regime in Iran continues activities and interventions that destabilize the Middle East: support for the brutal Assad regime, funding militias

and foreign fighters in Iraq and Yemen that undermine legitimate governments, and arming terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, which threaten our ally Israel." It then asserted, "We and our allies must counter Iran's aspirations of hegemony in the region." Regardless of whether Tillerson augmented his written statement using prepared talking points or he just improvised (to be gracious to the lawmaker posing the question), his answer was a significant deviation from the Trump administration's previous statements on Iran -- let alone longstanding U.S. policy.

A National Security Council spokesperson subsequently indicated that "an explicit affirmation" of regime change in Iran is not a policy option under consideration by the Trump administration. However, this off-handed and caveated dismissal is hard to evaluate as compared to the view of a sitting Secretary of State testifying before Congress. Moreover, with a policy review process still ongoing, this assurance cannot promise that the Administration's approach will ultimately exclude a regime change component, especially since Secretary Tillerson is a key player in that review. Thus, it only further clouds U.S. policy toward Iran.

Reactions in Iran

And, boy, did the Iranians notice, even if Washington did not. Tehran registered its protest in several venues, including with the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary General, and the Swiss ambassador to Iran, whose government has served as the United States' protecting power (a diplomatic intermediary) in Iran since May 1980. According to several news reports, the Iranian government delivered a letter condemning Tillerson's remarks as a "brazen interventionist plan that runs counter to every norm and principle of international law, as well as the letter and spirit of [the] UN Charter, and constitutes [] unacceptable behavior in international relations." The Iranians apparently went so far as to suggest that the United States had violated the pledge in the Algiers Accords (the agreements that ended the hostage crisis) not to intervene directly or indirectly in Iran's internal affairs. At the same time, well-known Iranians associated with the same movement as President Rouhani also condemned Tillerson's remark in a group statement, calling it "interventionist" and noting that it will result in an "increase of instability in the region," while unifying Iranians against outside influences.

Ironically, Tillerson's statement flirts with neo-conservative views that candidate Donald Trump sought to eschew. During the campaign, Trump emphatically promised not to hire those bound up with policies that he viewed as failures, like the second war in Iraq. Nonetheless, since becoming president, Trump has been forced to take positions on U.S. policies and roles in Iraq, Libya and Syria that range from realist to neo-con. Some have also seen Trump's personnel decisions as a barometer for Trump's neo-con flirtations. Iran will not be the only place where the president is going to be whipsawed by his foreign policy advisors, some of whom are advocates for ambitious, long-term commitments to specific conflicts, and his voters, many of whom feel they are owed a significantly reduced international burden for America.

The Trump administration is reviewing its Iran policy, but we have begun to see the outlines of the new direction. Administration officials appear to be working on a three-pronged approach aimed at (1) enforcing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as strictly as possible and addressing its (real and perceived) gaps and flaws, (2) blunting Iranian regional influence wherever possible, and (3) strengthening our allies in the region against Iran. As heavy ballast on our policy-making, both Israel and our Gulf partners are pressing for a strong anti-Iran policy. This influence was on full display during Trump's visit to the region. In the joint U.S.-Saudi statement, King Salman and Trump agreed on the "need to contain Iran's malign interference in the internal affairs of other states, instigation of sectarian strife, support of terrorism and armed proxies, and efforts to destabilize the countries in the region." Similarly, in Israel, Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed on the need to counter Iran and its proxies, including by building strong military capabilities to protect Israel and the region from Iranian aggression. However, in neither case did they announce a policy of regime change and no whispers from private conversations emerged either.

A New Day and a New King in Saudi Arabia

Last week, Washington awoke to a new landscape in Saudi Arabia, as one Crown Prince (Mohammed bin Nayef) was shuffled off the stage and a newly promoted Crown Prince (Mohammed bin Salman, or MbS) received congratulations and pledges of allegiance. MbS is broadly seen as the architect of the Yemen conflict and has also played a leading role on behalf of Saudi Arabia in the Qatar crisis. Now, having secured his succession to be king, MbS is likely to drive most of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. In a recent, widely quoted television interview, MbS warned Iran that he "will work so that it becomes a battle for them in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia." Undoubtedly, the Saudi agenda to respond to Iranian regional efforts will intensify, whether in Yemen, Qatar, or elsewhere.

Thus far, Yemen and Qatar remain, at best, incomplete foreign policy endeavors. After more than two years, Saudi-led Coalition military efforts to cabin malevolent Iranian involvement in Yemen have not been successful. The war in Yemen is creating an ungoverned space that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is exploiting to expand its reach and plot its next steps. With Iranian assistance and the support of a former Yemeni President (Ali Abdullah Saleh), the Houthi rebels have attacked Saudi Arabia's southern provinces and repeatedly fired indiscriminate missiles into Saudi territory. A Saudi-led Coalition has provided assistance to the legitimate (and internationally recognized) Yemeni government on the battlefield and politically. The United States has provided varying levels of support to the Saudis and Emiratis during the course of the conflict. Yet the military situation is largely stalemated and the political negotiations are effectively on life support.

With Qatar, the crisis is less ossified than Yemen, but the way out is also very unclear. The Saudi and Emirati governments raised grave concerns about Qatar's support for Islamist and extremist groups, and imposed a significant economic embargo and aviation ban on the country several weeks ago. A list of thirteen remedial actions that Qatar must take to secure the lifting of the embargo was recently presented, but its massive scope does not appear to offer any immediate resolution to the crisis. President Trump has forcefully emphasized the concerns raised about Qatari behavior in the region, while the State Department has sought to pressure all sides to resolve the crisis.

In Yemen and Qatar, the United States has serious equities at stake and has provided some measures of support to the Saudi and Emirati efforts. With the new Crown Prince no longer needing to navigate his path to the throne, Saudi foreign policy against Iran may take on an even more active posture. Whether that includes regime change publicly or not, it is likely that the Saudi government will have new requests for the United States. Both the Yemeni and Qatari crises have presented the United States with unexpected decision points and less than ideal options. In both cases, decisions were often made on short timelines and amended when the position became untenable from an American standpoint (to the great dismay of our partners). The coming decisions on Iran could be precipitated by regional stakeholders or accelerated by unforeseen or unplanned events (for example, another confrontation in or around al-Tanf). In either case, the Administration should approach these decisions with great care and precision.

What Next?

The Trump administration should seriously consider whether a regime change position -- whether peaceful or otherwise -- is a smart way to approach the problem set that Iran presents. Whatever "elements inside of Iran" supporting regime change that Tillerson was referencing, they will not be made stronger by highlighting their existence, specifically identifying them, or suggesting that they will receive foreign support. And especially not when those statements are made by a U.S. cabinet official. Instead, Tillerson's statement undermines any authenticity that these "elements" might have had in the Iranian system and gives the Iranian government yet another rationalization to mercilessly target its own citizens (whether about regime change or anything else).

As the process moves forward in Washington, the United States should take care not to stumble inadvertently into a

regime change policy toward Iran. That would benefit neither American short-term nor long-term interests.

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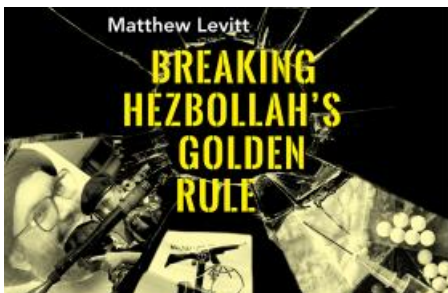
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