

The Costs of Lost U.S. Credibility

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Articles & Testimony

If the Obama administration is truly committed to containing Iran in the wake of the nuclear deal, it needs to understand how others in the region perceive its handling of Tehran's provocations.

In January, Iranian state television aired footage of ten captured American sailors, including a staged confession, apology, and even an expression of gratitude to Tehran for its provision of "hospitality." The sailors were released the next day, but Secretary of State Kerry said he was "angry and frustrated" by the videos, which were, by the way, a violation of the Geneva Conventions. Unfazed, weeks later, Tehran released new footage from the detention, apparently showing a U.S. sailor crying in captivity. Even more recently the regime has bragged that it has "recovered" hundreds of pages of information from the sailors' confiscated devices.

The pattern by now is all too familiar. Notwithstanding the nuclear deal, the end of sanctions, and a supposed new era of diplomatic detente, Tehran's posture toward Washington remains provocative and confrontational. Not wanting to risk the deal, the Obama Administration has responded to reckless Iranian behavior with indifference if not obsequiousness, projecting weakness and thus inviting even more problematic conduct by the theocracy.

Across the globe, the Administration is spending billions on "reassurance initiatives" -- selling weapons, deploying troops, and repositioning equipment. Yet in the Middle East, at least, the increased expenditures haven't redounded to enhanced confidence in Washington. This is, in large part, a problem of perception. Washington has not been sufficiently attentive to how its actions in the face of Iranian challenges play in the region. But Tehran and its allies are attentive. Compare, for example, the Obama Administration's handling of the incident involving the detained U.S. sailors to how Iran's proxy, the Lebanese Shi'a terrorist organization Hizballah, recently dealt with its own prisoner video dilemma.

In early February, two Hizballah militiamen fighting for the Assad regime in Syria were captured by the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. They were subsequently interviewed in custody by a Lebanese journalist. Lebanon's leading network, MTV, was slated to broadcast the Hizballahis' hour-long interview, but the militia intervened, threatening the channel and the reporter. As a result, only two short and relatively innocuous clips eventually aired.

It's not difficult to see why Hizballah acted to prevent the broadcast. The interview, with the soft-spoken and (shockingly) sympathetic prisoners, has since been posted on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw-fVbuerXM>), and is an unmitigated embarrassment for the militia. The prisoners, who were captured near Aleppo when they made a wrong turn and found themselves in enemy territory, said they had only received minimal combat training prior to deployment. Worse, "contrary to what we understood was the reality" -- that is, what they had been told by Hizballah higher ups -- they did not find an Aleppo brimming with Sunni foreign fighters. Instead, they described an Assad regime military offensive staffed by Lebanese and Iraqi Hizballah, "a large number of Iranians," and "Afghani Fatamids [Shi'a]."

The story of these hapless Hizballahis does not jibe with the militia's carefully cultivated narrative of battlefield competence, nor with the rationale for its Syria deployment. Hizballah was concerned enough about the video's potential damage to its image that it quashed it.

Unlike Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Washington appears far less concerned about its standing in the region. To be sure, the release of U.S. military and civilian captives held by Iran is a priority, but when the Administration doesn't push back in the face of continued provocations, it has a corrosive impact on U.S. credibility. As a result, today, when President Obama says that the United States "remain[s] steadfast in opposing Iran's destabilizing behavior," it simply beggars belief in palace and on street alike.

Indeed, across the Middle East, Washington's traditional Sunni allies are increasingly concerned about the credibility of Washington's security assurances vis-a-vis Iran. And for good reason. It's not just that President Obama publicly expresses ambivalence verging on disdain for Saudi Arabia. If the U.S. government didn't respond when Iran fired a missile within a mile of an American aircraft carrier transiting the Hormuz Straits in January, so the argument goes, what will Washington do when Iran targets Saudi Arabia?

In spite of Administration statements, Washington's traditional allies see that Iran continues its subversive activities with minimal or no consequence. From testing new ballistic missiles to reportedly smuggling armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators to Shi'a in Bahrain, the U.S. government response has been "measured," to use a State Department term that everyone understands really means tilting asymptotically toward zero.

So the provocations continue. Just two days after the January 18 prisoner swap between Washington and Tehran that succeeded in releasing *Washington Post* journalist Jason Rezaian, who had been detained by the theocracy for a year and a half, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq kidnapped three Americans in Baghdad. Anyone could have predicted this consequence of lowering the moral hazard bar, and several people did.

Quite aside from violating the Geneva Conventions by broadcasting video of captured servicemen, according to international law the sailors were captured illegally in the first place. And yet after their release, Secretary Kerry thanked Iran for its cooperation. The old saw is that a diplomat is someone who thinks twice about saying nothing. That's supposed to be a dig, but it would have been a far better way to handle this particular matter than Secretary Kerry's thinking too little about saying too much.

No wonder then, that Iran persists in its subversive activities and what U.S. military officials describe as "unnecessarily provocative and unsafe" actions toward U.S. forces in theater. If the Obama Administration is truly committed to containing Iran in the wake of the nuclear deal, it needs to become more aware of how it is being perceived in the region. Diplomacy is important, but so too is credible deterrence. The wages of continued U.S.

blandishment is an emboldened Iran.

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