

How the U.S., Not Iran, Is Making Concessions

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By overlooking Iran's longstanding policies, making unrequited nuclear concessions, remaining ambiguous on Syria, and allowing tensions to persist with regional allies, Washington is sending the wrong message to Tehran.

Citing U.S. and Arab officials, the *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that U.S.-Iran relations have "moved into an effective state of detente over the past year." Detente implies a mutual easing of tensions, but the changes in U.S.-Iran relations have been decidedly one-sided.

The central aim of American policy toward Iran in recent years had been to persuade Tehran to make a strategic shift: away from a strategy of projecting power and deterring adversaries through asymmetric means, and toward one that would adhere to international norms and reinforce regional peace and stability. Detente -- and, for that matter, a nuclear accord -- resulting from such a shift would be welcome by not only the U.S. but also its allies in the region and beyond.

Iran does not, however, appear to have undergone any such change. Iranian support for Hezbollah in Lebanon has continued unabated even as the group has thwarted efforts to strengthen Lebanese sovereignty and dispatched forces to Syria. According to the U.S. director of national intelligence, Hezbollah has increased "its global terrorist activity in recent years to a level that we have not seen since the 1990s." Tehran also continues to support non-state actors such as the Houthi rebels in Yemen and -- after a brief period of apparent estrangement accompanying the 2011 Arab uprisings -- Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups.

In Iraq, much is made of the supposed alignment of interests between the U.S. and Iran. But no such alignment is apparent. Iran's increased public profile in Iraq and its overt backing for Shiite militias -- which U.S. intelligence officials have warned would inflame sectarian tensions -- is directly at odds with President Barack Obama's strategy of seeking to restore Iraqi Sunnis' confidence in Baghdad, turn them against the Islamic State, and promote their inclusion in Iraq's government and institutions.

In Syria, the strategic rift between the U.S. and Iran is even clearer. Washington's stated policy is that Bashar al-Assad is illegitimate and that ending the Syrian conflict requires that he cede power to an inclusive, representative government. Iran, on the other hand, has worked to shore up President Assad, dispatching military advisers and paramilitary proxies, and organizing regular and irregular Syrian forces.

Nor when it comes to the Islamic State (ISIL) are the U.S. and Iran on the same page. Both countries are fighting the group, to be sure; but you wouldn't guess as much by listening to Iranian leaders. They accuse the United States of having created ISIL (which Iran's supreme leader says represents "American Islam") as a pretext for intervening in Syria and Iraq. Iranian leaders also pointed to Islamic State militants' recent seizure of errant American aid airdrops as evidence that Washington is providing ISIL with material support.

In short, what has changed is not Iran's strategy but the American response. We are choosing to overlook, rather than counter, long-standing Iranian policies. This -- combined with the concessions we have made in the nuclear talks, the ambiguity of U.S. policy toward the Assad regime and rising tensions with once-stalwart allies in the region -- reinforce the impression that the United States, not Iran, is undergoing a strategic shift.

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[\(http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/11/03/how-the-u-s-not-iran-is-making-concessions/\)](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/11/03/how-the-u-s-not-iran-is-making-concessions/). ❖

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