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by ANDREW DAY
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The Myth of Iran

There are two Irans – one mythical, one historical.

According to the myth, Iran is a global pariah, an unmitigated menace to its population, a foe to friends of peace and progress – terror itself. This implacable nemesis of democratic ideals flouts treaties and norms in its psychotic quest for apocalyptic weaponry. America's role in this mythology is Herculean: standing up to the Persian bully in defense of popular government, the rule of law, and global peace.

In the U.S., there is a deep, bipartisan consensus concerning Iran's monstrosity. It was thus a rare diplomatic breakthrough when, after twenty months of negotiations, the P5+1 and Iran produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The agreement is straightforward: The West lifts sanctions and recognizes Iran's right to enrich uranium; Tehran reduces extant nuclear stockpiles and caps enrichment at a level far below weapons-grade uranium. So far, Iran has held up its end of the bargain, filling centrifuges with concrete, shipping "dual use" materials to Russia, and allowing the IAEA to verify compliance.

Nevertheless, the JCPOA is in danger, because President Trump seems determined to destroy this "worst deal ever." His hostile rhetoric has already undermined the treaty, since lending institutions are growing anxious that the U.S. will ramp up sanctions, robbing Iran's economy of badly needed foreign investment. Among foreign policy planners and analysts, animosity towards Iran continues barely abated. Consequently, opinion leaders have been reluctant to denounce Trump's antagonistic posture.

The mythical Iran looms over and distorts public debate, not as a legitimate nation-state to diplomatically engage, but as a monster to tame and, ultimately, to vanquish. The nuclear accord's existential weakness results from this unstable normative foundation in U.S. discourse. President Obama portrayed the agreement as an opportunity for Iran to rejoin the international community, and emphasized that new restrictions would block Iran from weaponizing. This framing reaffirmed the false image of Iran as a rogue state with clandestine plans to build nuclear weapons.

To understand the actual logic underlying the accord, one must look to recent history. In 1953, the CIA deposed the democratically-elected Mohammad Mossadegh, his comeuppance for nationalizing Iran's oil industry. The U.S. supported Mossadegh's replacement, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, an unpopular autocratic ruler. In 1979, revolutionary forces coalesced to overthrow his dictatorship. Though the revolution comprised a wide ideological spectrum, the Ayatollah Khomeini was able to purge left-wing elements and consolidate power. The Islamic Republic of Iran was born.

Since 1979, the U.S. has punished Iran's recalcitrance. In the 1980s, Iraq waged a devastating war of aggression against Iran with U.S. backing, killing hundreds of thousands of Iranians. Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons left a persistent scar in Iran's national psyche. Today Iran is encircled by U.S. military might, and recently witnessed U.S. invasions of its eastern and western neighbors. Unfortunately, even relatively dovish Democrats are unwilling to see this interventionism from Tehran's perspective.

An adept manager of empire, President Obama pursued détente with Iran because he determined the U.S. should refocus from Central to East Asia. But unless the U.S. works to repair relations with Iran, the JCPOA only kicks the nuclear canister down the road. The accord extends Iran's "breakout time" – the estimated time between initiation and completion of a weapons program – but it does not automatically increase trust and understanding. Washington seems unlikely to use this crucial time to reconstitute U.S. – Iran relations in a more stable, peaceful direction. It is time for concerned citizens to join the debate.

We should push back against the myth of Iran, highlighting Iran's compliance with the NPT, its record of non-aggression against other nation-states, its right to peaceful nuclear energy, and its ongoing cooperation with the world's most intrusive inspections regime. We should point out that U.S. intelligence agencies have determined Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons. Though the "war on terror" has caused misery and chaos, we should

remind our compatriots that Iran has helped the U.S. fight the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS. When pressed to offer a long-term solution to nuclear proliferation, we should answer that Iran has long supported a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, a proposal that the U.S. would be wise to encourage. Finally, we must sustain opposition to Trump's Muslim ban, which unfairly targets Iranians and corrodes cultural interchange. Interventionists assume their own narrow agenda – destroying the JCPOA and overthrowing the “mad mullahs” – coincides with the Iranian people's. But most Iranians want dialogue – not conflict – with the West. When U.S. politicians threaten bellicose actions, they embolden Iran's hardliners and undermine its moderates. To escape this cycle of hate and paranoia, we must do our part to attenuate pervasive myths of empire, civilize American discourse, and improve the possibilities for peace.