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## America's Two-Faced Policy on Iran

The Obama administration seeks to demonize Iran — along with Russia and China — while also demanding their help in areas of U.S. interest, an approach that is both disingenuous and dangerous, as former British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

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In an article entitled “Why America needs Iran in Iraq,” former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad argues that “the chaos in Baghdad, culminating in the temporary occupation of the parliament by followers of Shiite Islamist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, is undermining the war against the Islamic State; weakening Iraq’s economy; and accelerating the country’s disintegration.

“Without cooperation between the United States, Iran and Iraq’s top Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, the crisis could very well lead to the collapse of the entire political system set up in Iraq during the temporary U.S. occupation ... To prevent this, Washington needs Tehran’s help. And Iran should be as motivated to seek stability [in Iraq] as much as Washington, because” Khalilzad asserts, “Iran, currently is losing favour in Iraq.”

Putting aside the questionable implication that Iran might somehow, through co-operation with America, raise its standing amongst Iraqis, Khalilzad’s presumption that Iran should now attend to America’s needs in Iraq, coupled with Secretary of State John Kerry’s insistence that Iran should help America to end the conflict in Syria too, throw into sharp relief the paradox inherent at the heart of U.S. diplomacy towards Iran, Russia (and China also).

This approach has been dubbed the “middle way” by former special adviser to the Assistant Secretary of State, Jeremy Shapiro: the U.S. Administration has no desire for an all-out confrontation with these three states. They are militarily hard nuts, and there is not much appetite for yet more military confrontation amongst a weary and wary American public (to the continuing frustration of the neocons).

More prosaically, the global financial system is now so brittle, so delicately poised, that it is not at all certain that the prospect of conflict would give the lift to America’s flagging economy that war generally is supposed to give. It might just snap the financial system, instead — hence the Middle Way.

Shapiro points out the obvious contradiction to this two-track approach: the U.S. no longer can ignore such powerful states. Its window of absolute, unchallenged, uni-polar power has passed. *America needs the help of these states*, but at the same time, it seeks precisely to counter these states’ potential to rival or limit American power in any way.

And America simply ignores the core complaints that fuel the tensions between itself and these states. It simply declines to address them. Shapiro concludes that this foreign policy approach is unsustainable, and bound to fail: “This dual-track approach, condemning Russia [or Iran] as an aggressor one day, [whilst] seeking to work with Moscow [or Tehran] the next ... would [ultimately] force ever-greater confrontation.”

### **The ‘Middle Way’**

In a sense, the U.S. approach towards Iran seems to be mirroring the so-called “middle way” policy which the U.S. Administration pursues towards Russia, whereby the putative “reset” with Russia was set aside (when President Vladimir Putin assumed the Presidency for the second time), and Obama – rather than seek outright confrontation with Russia – ruled that America however, would only co-operate with Russia when it suited it, but the U.S. would not deign to address Russia’s core issues of its “outsider” status in Europe, or its containment in Asia — or its concerns about a global order that was being used to corner Russia and to crush dissenter states who refused to enter the global order on America’s terms alone.

And Obama did little to drawback the NATO missile-march towards Russia’s borders (ostensibly, it may be recalled, to save Europe *from Iranian missiles*).

Ostensibly, too, the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) could have been America’s “reset” with Iran. Some, including a number of prominent Iranian politicians, thought it was.

But National Security Advisor Susan Rice was very explicit to Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* that this was never intended: “It is assumed, at least among his critics, that Obama sought the Iran deal because he has a vision of a historic American-Persian rapprochement. But his desire for the nuclear agreement was born of pessimism as much as it was of optimism.

“The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the U.S. and Iran,” Susan Rice told [Goldberg]. “It was far more pragmatic and minimalist. The aim was

very simply to make a dangerous country substantially less dangerous. No one had any expectation that Iran would be a more benign actor.”

And so, we see a similar pattern, the possibility of a real “reset” with Iran is pre-meditatively set aside (as per Rice), whilst the dual-track approach of condemning Iran for its ballistic missile tests (which have nothing to do with JCPOA), and its support for Hizbullah, are condemned one day, whilst Iran’s help in Iraq and Syria is being demanded on the next day.

At the same time, Iran’s core dispute with the U.S. – its complaints that exclusion from the international financial system is not being ameliorated as JCPOA was supposed so to do – are not being addressed. Rather they are being met with a shrug that implies “did they really expect anything else?”

Well, some (but by no means all) Iranian politicians had done just that: they had raised the Iranian public’s expectations that *all* sanctions – other than specific U.S. sanctions – would be lifted. They rather bet their credibility on it, as it were, and may pay a political price eventually.

And as NATO deploys a further 4,000 troops in the Baltic states and Poland, on Russia’s border, so too the U.S. Congress continues its figurative advance on Iran’s frontiers.

Here is Iran’s (conservative) *Keyhan* newspaper: “The draft of a new resolution has been presented to the US Congress in which Iran is accused of creating tension in the Persian Gulf, and the US Government has been urged to confront Iran and impose new sanctions against our country. Randy Forbes, a Republican member of the US House of Representatives, has drafted a resolution, which if passed by the Congress, condemns *Iran’s military presence in the Persian Gulf as a provocation*” (emphasis added)

Shapiro’s specific warning about the “middle way” approach was that “political and bureaucratic factors on both sides would force ever-greater confrontation.” But this is not the only risk, nor does it even constitute being the biggest risk (besides that of having undermined those in Iran and Russia who had put their “hat in the ring” of contemplating *Entente* with the United State).

### **America’s Bad Faith**

Rather, it is by making this policy approach quite general to those states which have taken on themselves the burden of being the symbol for a non-Western, alternative vision (Russia, Iran and China, *inter alia*), that a perceived breach of *the spirit* of the JCPOA (at the least), will have wider repercussions.

Russia and China both spent political capital in order to help persuade Iran to sign up to the JCPOA: Will they not wonder whether America is to be trusted? China has complicated negotiations in hand with America on trade and financial issues, whilst Russia has been trying to resolve ballistic missile, as well as Ukraine sanctions issues, with America.

Is it not a straw in the wind for the consequences to this policy when a prominent Russian commentator, Fyodor Lukyanov, who is not at all hostile to rapprochement with the

West, writes in *End of the G8 Era* that using Russia's prospective inclusion in the G8 as an instrument of pressure on Russia is pointless?:

“The G8 reflected a certain period of history when Russia really wanted to be integrated into the so-called Extended West. Why it did not happen? Something went wrong? This is another topic. The most important thing is that it did not happen at all ... it seemed (in the 1990s) that this membership would not mean just participation in yet another club, but a strategic decision aimed at the future.

“However, the desirable future did not come, and probably won't come. It is obvious now, that the world does not develop in the direction of the Western model. So, now we have what we have, and there is no reason to restore the G8.”

May this general sentiment come to be reflected in Iran too, as the sanctions-lifting issue drags on? Did the U.S. then “win one over Iran” through the JCPOA accord – as the shrugs of U.S. shoulders at Iranian complaints, might imply? Was Iran just naïve? Did they really think that the U.S. was simply going to empower Iran financially?

It is pretty clear that the Supreme Leader understood the situation precisely — he had, after all some experience of U.S. non-compliance with agreements from the Lebanese hostage negotiations of the 1980s.

But what has Iran lost by the JCPOA? A few Iranians may have had their fingers burned in the process, but Iran achieved three important things: the world now knows that it was not Iran that was the impediment to a nuclear deal; the deal has transformed Iran's public image – and created an opening – with the rest of the world (including Europe); and it has, in the process, constructed and strengthened strategic political and economic ties with Russia and China.

But most important of all, the rift *within* Iran that stemmed from the sense amongst some Iranian orientations, that President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric was a principal obstacle to normalizing with the West, *has been addressed*: an Iranian government, with a Western-friendly face, has been given, and seen to have been given, the full chance to negotiate a solution to the nuclear issue. Whatever the final outcome, that boil has been lanced.

No, the Iranian leadership has not been naïve.