

ILAN BERMAN'S

IRAN'S DEADLY AMBITION

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S QUEST FOR GLOBAL POWER

Are we really on the cusp of détente with Iran?

Conventional wisdom seems to think so and it would be fair to say that outreach toward Iran has become the centerpiece of the Obama administration's foreign-policy legacy.

But as Iran's leadership engages with the West, behind the scenes they are putting the gas on a plan for world influence that threatens Western interests and security at every corner of the globe. *Iran's Deadly Ambition* shows how, in our eagerness to conclude the nuclear deal, the United States has missed the big picture and turned a blind eye to the Islamic Republic's fomentation of international terrorism, its support of genocidal rogue states, its continued domestic repression, and other actions that prove Iranian leadership still views itself at war with America and the West.

This past April, commenting on the pending nuclear agreement with Iran, President Obama expressed his hope that the nuclear deal would serve as a vehicle for the Islamic Republic to at long last shed its



international pariah status and “rejoin the community of nations.” But *Iran's Deadly Ambition* shows that our government's rush to appease demonstrates a naive misreading of Iran's revolutionary ideology, rewards Iran's ayatollahs and emboldens their hegemonic objectives, and defers rather than averts the West's nuclear nightmare.

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IRAN'S DEADLY AMBITION

REVEALS

Iran remains committed to the Ayatollah Khomeini's mission of "exporting" its radical revolution and remaking the Middle East in its image.

Iran's warfare is characterized by use of proxies, an economy of violence, and a long game approach to the global competition.

The Islamic Republic still ranks as the world's foremost sponsor of international terrorism.

The Iranian regime has been instrumental in keeping Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad, in power—and has bankrolled Assad's war against his own people.

Iran has established a covert beachhead South of the US border, where Hezbollah is entrenched in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.

How and why Vladimir Putin's Russia has become the key enabler of Iran's nuclear ambitions and global reach.

How Iran is succeeding in penetrating, fragmenting, and destabilizing Yemen and Iraq.

The Islamic Republic has fueled Africa's recent conflicts—and armed Sudan's al-Bashir regime with \$12 billion in heavy weaponry.

How Iran learned about nuclear diplomacy from its friend and fellow rogue state, North Korea.

Iran is a first-tier cyber power capable of attacking U.S. infrastructure—including the power grid, trains, airlines, and refineries.



To schedule an interview with Ilan Berman contact:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ILAN BERMAN



Ilan Berman is Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.

“BERMAN HAS DONE
AN ENORMOUS SERVICE
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AFFAIRS.”

—*Middle East Quarterly*



Ilan Berman is Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC. An expert on regional security in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Russian Federation,

he has consulted for both the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Department of Defense, and provided assistance on foreign policy and national security issues to a range of governmental agencies and congressional offices.

Mr. Berman is a member of the Associated Faculty at Missouri State University’s Department of Defense and Strategic Studies. He also serves as a columnist for Forbes.com, and as the Editor of The Journal of International Security Affairs. Mr. Berman is the author, most recently of, *Implosion: The End of Russia and What It Means for America* (Regnery Publishing, 2013).

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“Mr. Berman has done great work in identifying the gaps in American strategy and proposing some solutions, and policymakers would do well to consider them.”

—WASHINGTON TIMES

“Berman’s careful analysis and thoughtful conclusions are a welcome addition to the ongoing debate about the way forward.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

PRAISE FOR

IRAN’S DEADLY AMBITION

“With Washington fixated on the intricacies of Iran’s nuclear program, Ilan Berman wisely refocuses our attention on the bigger picture: an Iran with global aspirations and new international opportunities to advance its radical agenda. *Iran’s Deadly Ambition* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the next great threat to America’s security and the security of our allies in the Middle East.”

—THE HONORABLE JOSEPH LIEBERMAN,
FORMER SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT (1989–2013)

“*Iran’s Deadly Ambition* provides a timely look into the true scope of the many challenges we face from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Policymakers in Washington and our closest international partners would do well to read Ilan Berman’s insights beyond the current headlines. They would do even better to act on his ideas.”

— LIEUTENANT GENERAL MICHAEL T. FLYNN (USA, RET.),
FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY



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ILAN BERMAN

Q&A



“Iran’s ayatollahs see the nuclear deal as a lifeline for their regime.”

What is the West’s biggest misconception about the Iranian regime? What makes them tick?

BERMAN: The biggest misconception that the West harbors about Iran—and the one that permeates virtually every aspect of the new nuclear deal—is that, at the end of the day, the Islamic Republic is a pragmatic, status quo power. But it is not. Iran is still a radical, revolutionary state with a distinct plan for global expansion—one that it is putting into action today.

Why is Obama so eager to cut a deal?

BERMAN: No matter what its officials say publicly, it’s clear that the Obama administration sees the new nuclear deal with Iran not as simply a transactional bargain but as a transformational one. As they see it, this is an agreement that helps reset relations between Iran and the West, and make an ally out of the Islamic Republic. If that happens, then America will have a new regional partner and additional assistance in the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group. But the overwhelming evidence suggests that Iran doesn’t see the nuclear deal the same way at all—and that it has no plans to abandon its long-standing support for international terrorism, its anti-American behavior, or its regional troublemaking.

Were the sanctions succeeding?

BERMAN: You could say that sanctions were a tactical

success but a strategic failure. There is no question that the pressure applied by the international community created major economic pain for the Iranian regime. That is what originally brought them to the negotiating table in November of 2013. But that same pressure did not succeed in chilling Iran’s enthusiasm for “the bomb,” or curbing its regional ambitions. With sanctions dismantled—perhaps for good—Iran has the breathing room it needs to realize its global vision.

“IRAN IS STILL A RADICAL, REVOLUTIONARY STATE”

How do the Mullahs view the deal? Can we forget about regime change in Iran?

BERMAN: Iran’s ayatollahs see the nuclear deal as a lifeline for their regime. They should; the terms negotiated in Vienna are overwhelmingly favorable to the regime in Tehran, in both political and economic terms. But the agreement is not going to be a vehicle for the Iranian regime’s transformation, as the Obama administration seems to believe. In fact, quite the opposite; the Iranian regime is stronger and more consolidated now than it was just a few years ago.

You recently described the deal as a Marshall Plan for Iran—what will they do with all the cash?

BERMAN: One can certainly hope that the Iranian regime will use the money to improve domestic conditions and stabilize their rickety economy, as the White House clearly does. And some of the money might indeed be used that way. But the sheer scope of sanctions relief that Iran is poised to receive—equivalent to one-quarter of their annual budget—will translate into additional dollars for the regime to further fund international terrorism or expand its current regional involvement in places like Syria and Yemen.

What about Iran's human rights violations?

BERMAN: It was once hoped that Western engagement with Iran could help improve domestic conditions. But current American and European policy, focused overwhelmingly on Iran's nuclear program, hasn't done that at all. In fact, since Iran's current (and ostensibly moderate) president, Hassan Rouhani, took power two years ago, human rights conditions within Iran have deteriorated even further. Public executions are at their highest recorded point ever, the regime is clamping down more forcefully on the press, and is erecting an Internet filter to isolate its population from the outside world. The West's current engagement with Iran won't ameliorate any of these trends; to the contrary, it's likely to reinforce them.

What did Iran learn about nuclear diplomacy from North Korea?

BERMAN: Over the past three decades, the North Koreans have perfected a "playbook" for diplomacy with the West, wrangling valuable political and economic concessions without ever truly giving up their nuclear ambitions. Iran has watched all this, and learned a valuable lesson: that, for all of its current arrangements with the West, Iran can not only maintain its nuclear ambitions, but even expand them, all while reaping the benefits in the form of U.S. and European assistance.

"CYBERSPACE IS A NEW DOMAIN OF CONFLICT BETWEEN IRAN AND THE WEST"

Have we really curbed their ability to get the bomb?

President Obama has said publicly that the JCPOA, as the new nuclear deal is known, has blocked all of the ways by which Iran can get a bomb. This isn't true; the agreement only deals with overt "pathways" (like uranium enrichment), meaning that the regime can still acquire a nuclear capability covertly—perhaps from an ally like North Korea. Moreover, because the deal is time-limited (spanning just 15 years), it can only slow down Iran's nuclear processes, rather than end them. In other words, through the agreement we might have bought ourselves a bit of time, but perhaps not all that much.

This tactical victory comes at a major cost, however, because the nuclear program is just one part of the contemporary challenge posed by Iran. Iran's deep support for terrorism and its ambitions to become a regional hegemon in the Middle East represent equally grave challenges to America and its allies. And today, as a result of the JCPOA, Iran has more resources than ever before to pour into those projects.

What about the threat of cyber attacks?

BERMAN: Cyberspace is a new domain of conflict between Iran and the West—although still a largely unappreciated one. Iran is pursuing a sophisticated two-pronged cyber strategy to simultaneously isolate its population from the outside world, and to demonstrate its capability to target the West in the event of open conflict. It's a testament to Iran's cyber capabilities that the U.S. intelligence community now ranks it as one of the "big three" cyber threats, behind Russia and China.

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AN EXCERPT FROM

IRAN'S DEADLY AMBITION



The danger emanating from Iran today
is not strictly a function of its nuclear ambitions.

In its pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama administration has turned a blind eye to both the Iranian regime's internal deformities and its destructive behavior abroad. Worse still, the White House has become incentivized to not pay any heed to, or call attention to, what the Iranian regime truly thinks, says, and does, lest it prejudice prospects for political alignment between Washington and Tehran. The end result is an Iran policy that is predicated more upon aspiration than reality and pins its hopes on the prospect of historic reconciliation with Iran at great strategic and moral cost.

Which brings us back to the core problem. The danger emanating from Iran today is not strictly a function of its nuclear ambitions. Rather, it is a product of the Iranian regime itself. More than thirty-five years after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini swept to power in Tehran, the Islamic Republic he created remains a radical expansionist and revisionist state.

As a result, any agreement struck with Iran, now or in the future, will not eliminate the strategic threat that Iran poses to America, its allies, or its global interests. This is because that threat emanates not from Iran's nuclear program, but from the Iranian regime itself. This is especially true if the deal ultimately struck between Washington and Tehran is

a bad one that leaves Iran's nuclear capability largely intact, thereby granting Iran's ayatollahs the means to establish their country as a regional hegemon. Simply put, Washington will not wake up the day after a deal with Tehran to find that Iran's regime has changed its political stripes, or its ideological ones. Rather, the opposite is likely to be true; a nuclear-armed Iran, or an Iran that is a threshold nuclear power, will be more empowered than ever to promote its radical vision of global Islamic revolution.

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Iranian officials, at least, certainly believe it will. Back in 2012, even as their country weathered an unprecedented economic crisis, Iran's officials were thinking big. The Islamic Republic "has broken the monopoly of the U.S. and a number of Western countries over the world management system," General Yadollah Javani, the former head of the IRGC's Politburo, told a gathering of naval forces in Bandar Abbas that year. According to Javani, Iran "has turned into a strategic rival that can change the

structure of the world's command center and become a member of it." It is a view that has only strengthened of late, as America appears to undergo a process of strategic retreat in world affairs.

In December 2014, the Obama administration went public with a major change in policy toward Latin America. Speaking from the White House Cabinet Room, President Obama formally abandoned more than half a century of policy toward the Castro regime in Cuba, announcing plans to normalize diplomatic relations with Havana, sketching out plans for an embassy in the Cuban capital, and promising to formally revisit the country's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

The decision was nearly two years in the making. In the fall of 2013, in a major address before the Organization of the American States, Secretary of State John Kerry announced with great fanfare that the "era of the Monroe Doctrine is over." That pronouncement—intended to reassure regional powers that America's sometimes heavy-handed approach to the region was a thing of the past—touched off a year and a half of quiet diplomacy between Washington and Havana, culminating in the December 2014 opening.

"CONTINUED POLITICAL INTRANSIGENCE AND ANTI-AMERICANISM CAN PAY IMPORTANT STRATEGIC DIVIDENDS"

Since then, more than a few Iran watchers have applauded the move, suggesting that a similar "reset" directed at Tehran would yield the same salutary results in our relationship with Iran. Unfortunately, officials in Tehran appear to have drawn precisely the opposite conclusion.

As the Islamic Republic sees it, the change in U.S. policy reflects nothing less than a full-scale failure of Washington's long-standing approach to Cuba.

It is also an important confirmation that continued political intransigence and anti-Americanism can pay important strategic dividends. Or, as one spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry put it, "[t]he resistance of the Cuban people and officials on their principles and the ideals of the revolution during the last 50 years showed that a policy of isolation and sanctions from domineering powers against the will and endurance of independent governments and people is ineffective and inefficient."

In other words, as seen from Tehran, America's about-face on Cuba was not an enlightened attempt at outreach, as President Obama stressed in his White House announcement. Rather, it was a sign of U.S. policy collapse—and an indication that intransigence of the type practiced in both Havana and Tehran can pay concrete dividends.

"WESTERN POLICY MAKERS HAVE TRIED TO AVOID MAKING HARD CHOICES REGARDING IRAN"

Where does all this leave the United States and its allies? For much of the past decade, Western policy makers have tried to avoid making hard choices regarding Iran, preferring to defer the decisive action necessary to bring Iran's nuclear ambitions and global activism to heel. Even today, the prevailing view in Washington and European capitals appears to be that a larger political normalization will inevitably follow coming to terms with Iran over its nuclear program.

This represents a dangerous misreading of the ideology that animates the Iranian regime and of the Islamic Republic's enduring ambition for both regional hegemony and global influence. Yet those factors are more relevant than ever before. Today, perceptions of American strategic weakness, aversion to foreign entanglements, and declining appetite for global conflict have convinced Iran's leaders that they are poised for greater opportunity on the world stage than ever before.