

“Iran and the Middle East: Leveraging Chaos”

Featuring

Karim Sadjadpour

November 29, 2016

Mr. Sadjadpour began with the question, “How is Iran relevant to U.S. national and foreign policy?” He identified three major challenges and three thematic issues in U.S. national security and foreign policy in which Iran is integral.

Major challenges to U.S. national security, U.S. Foreign Policy:

1. Syria (Humanitarian Crisis)
 - Financial and military support to Syria, support of Assad regime
2. Iraq & Afghanistan
3. Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Perennial Challenge)

Thematic Issues:

1. Terrorism
 - According to State Dept., Iran remains #1 state sponsor of terrorism
2. Nuclear Proliferation
3. Energy Security
 - Reserves of oil and natural gas

Mr. Sadjadpour argued that the incoming administration cannot ignore Iran. Military conflict with Iran will likely exacerbate the challenges mentioned, however there have been no major successes during the past eight years dealing with Iran diplomatically. Mr. Sadjadpour offered seven dualities present in Iran that are sources of these diplomatic challenges.

Iran’s Dualities

1. Superiority Complex/Inferiority Complex
 - Other ancient nation states such as China, Russia, Turkey and India, to an extent, have this duality. Iranian history goes back 2500+ years. Their neighbor, Saudi Arabia, can’t go back 100 years.
 - The country’s history gives Iran an elevated place in the world, but there is an enormous gap between where they are and where they’d like to be. China, Russia and Turkey are experiencing a similar paradox.
2. “...but Iran has to decide whether it is a nation or a cause.” -Henry A. Kissinger
 - If Iran sees itself as a nation state and pursues its national interests (that which forwards the economic prosperity and security of a country’s people), there is a lot of room for overlap and cooperation with the United States.
 - Mr. Sadjadpour argued that as long as Ayatollah Khamenei is in power, Iran will continue to see itself as a cause, not pursuing national interests. This will make it unlikely that Iran and US will be able to normalize relations.
3. Iran has a regime that resembles North Korea and a society that is, in many ways, trying to emulate South Korea.
 - The Iran regime is deeply ideological and has prioritized military and nuclear prowess over economic prowess. While it is not as totalitarian as North Korea, the

society would like to reintegrate with outside world.

4. Iran's most powerful officials are inaccessible and most accessible officials are not powerful.
 - Ayatollah Khamenei has not left the country since 1989, when he came to power. He doesn't meet with U.S. and Western officials. A parallel government exists with a president and foreign minister who are very accessible, but do not make decisions.
5. In 1979, Iranians experienced a revolution without democracy. Today, they seek a democracy without a revolution.
 - Iranians may seek wholesale change and seek revolutionary ends, but they are not willing to pursue revolutionary means. The pace of change in Iran will be more deliberate and slow.
6. Iran is both the arsonist and the fire brigade in today's Middle East.
 - Looking at the hot spots and main sources of Sunni radicalism (ISIS, Al Qaeda), Iran bears responsibility based on its support for the previous government in Iraq and its current support of Assad. However, Iran is on the frontlines fighting against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.
 - Mr. Sadjadpour posited that this will present a quandary to the incoming administration. How do you deal with Iran in the fight against ISIS? It is the enemy of the enemy, which can still be an enemy. Do we enlist Shiite radicals to battle Sunni radicals? Or will this create more Sunni radicals?
7. Nuclear Deal
 - Iran's nuclear program is not an energy program nor a weapons program. A [study from the Carnegie Endowment](#) found a nuclear program can provide merely 2% of Iran's energy needs. Due to faulty transmission lines, 15% energy is wasted.
 - Mr. Sadjadpour postulated that Iran signed this deal motivated by economic reasons. Iran was hemorrhaging hundreds of billions of dollars due to sanctions, tens of billions of dollars because of oil prices and billions trying to sustain the Assad regime.
 - The deal may unravel due to a disagreement about the nature of the deal. Our understanding is that we can sanction Iran for its behavior, testing missiles and human rights abuses. Iran's leadership makes it very clear that any additional sanctions would be a violation and were the U.S. to violate, Iran would reconstitute its nuclear activities.

Five years ago, there was a widespread consensus that Iran was a source of instability in the Middle East. Nowadays, they say the region is unravelling, but Iran looks pretty stable. Mr. Sadjadpour concluded his remarks with the suggestion that the United States needs to try to work with Iran.