



SHAHS AND SANCTIONS:

the story of past, present, and future tensions with Iran

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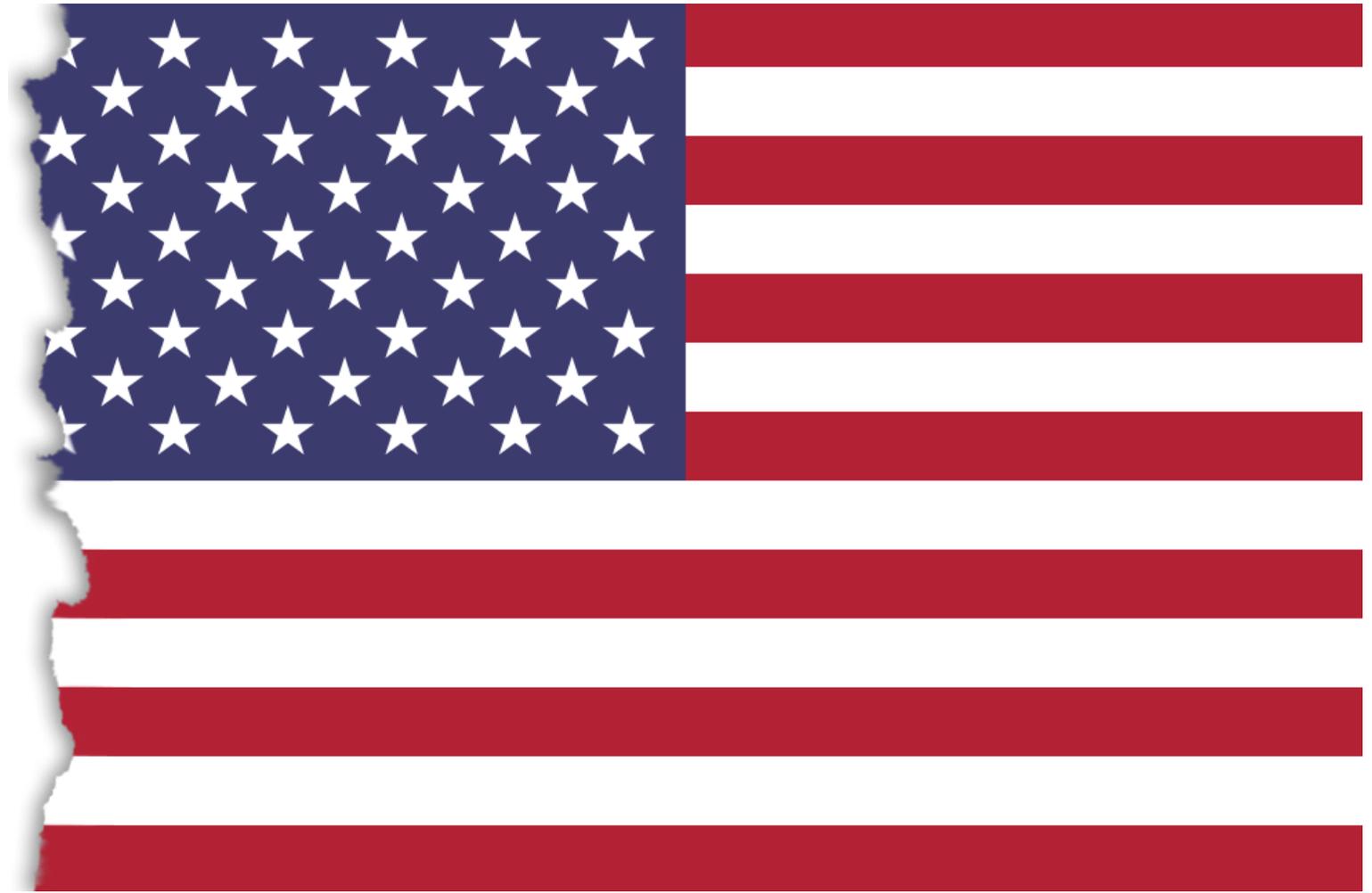
The light began flooding the ornately baroque corridors of the Palais Coburg hotel in Vienna's Old City district as the sun rose on the morning of July 14, 2015. Diplomatic aides hurriedly rushed around the VIP suites and ceremonious meeting rooms of the hotel as the ministers of foreign affairs from the delegations of six major world powers and the Islamic Republic of Iran gathered to seal an arduous twenty-month process of negotiation, setbacks, and political and personal sacrifice with their signatures on what former President Obama has since touted as a "historic" deal for the West's relationship with Iran and its highly controversial nuclear program.¹

The deal itself stipulates little that, outside the context of the strained

relationship between Iran and the United States, might call it a landmark deal. Mostly middle-of-the-road terms that reflect the amount of diplomatic work that went into the accords, like putting Iran's nuclear research on hold for ten years and the lifting of economic sanctions on Iran's energy and financial industries, failed to convince many of former President Obama's domestic and foreign opponents of the deal's importance in addressing a nuclear Iran.² On the contrary, politicians like Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have taken a diametrically opposite interpretation of the deal, going so far as to call it a "terrible, dangerous mistake" and "historically bad."^{3 4} The current presidential administration has re-

peatedly characterized the nuclear accords as not "much of an agreement," repeatedly accusing the Islamic Republic of violating the deal's terms.⁵ Moreover, vociferous opposition to the accords that began even before its terms were settled and became public in mid-July 2015 implies that there is an element separate from its content that animates political discussion of the issue of the Iran deal and relations with Iran in general.

It's hard to deny that the historically intense distrust between the United States and Iran helps motivate some of the anti-deal sentiment in each country. It's also, however, this same shared history of suspicion that may hold some of the most important insights about the deal itself. The context for this understanding is the



thread of Iranian-Western relations through the ages of colonialism and decolonization, the Islamic Revolution, and the formation of the current regime in Iran. A further layer of complexity in looking at the nuclear negotiations is added with the consideration of the contemporary social and political atmosphere in the Iranian domestic sphere. Much of the opposition to the accords in the United States has belied and even ignored the complicated nature of Iran's interactions with the rest of the world, as well as the specifics of the deal itself. This often-overlooked background speaks of a situation far more complex than what many who oppose the accords seem to entertain and that must be taken into account if the United States and the West want to see long-term diplomatic success with

Iran.

Although Iran maintained contact with Europe under the late-Renaissance rule of Shah Abbas I, widespread Iranian contact with the West in the modern era didn't begin in full force until the demise of the Safavid Dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century.⁶ A series of weak and fragmented dynasties lasting almost a century led to territorial and trade encroachment from both the Ottomans and Western agents like Russia and the Dutch and British East India Companies.⁷ The typical model of European colonization generally begins with colonizers creating selective economic inroads, followed by gradual expansion of influence, to an eventually complete political and economic subjugation of the colonized country.

Had it not been for the presence either of an adamant Russo-British rivalry in the Persian region or the resource curse of enormous oil reserves, Iran's historical development would doubtless have followed the pattern of other colonized countries in its region. Tensions between Britain and Russia were initially based on geographic importance for the Russian Caucasus and Russian-dominated Central Asia and British interests in the Persian Gulf and British-controlled India. Nevertheless, the rivalry ensured that neither country could establish official territorial control over the Persian monarchy's domain.

While Persia's *de jure* independence was preserved continuously through the colonial era and into the era of decolonization, it was of little comfort to

the Iranian people. As the demand for oil blossomed with Western modernization, so did demand for access to Iran's oilfields. British commercial interests conducted predatory and inequitable business transactions with the native monarchy, among the most infamous of which was the 1872 Reuter concession. The deal, which the British viceroy of India himself memorably called "the most complete surrender of the entire resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history," gave the British Baron de Reuter exclusive rights to mine for most minerals and sole authority to construct roads and railroads throughout the country.⁸ Even worse for Iran, the railroads Reuter was to build weren't constructed until after World War I, leaving Iranian infrastructure woefully underdeveloped.⁹ The domestic backlash — and the tsarist opposition — against this historically bad deal was enough that the Persian government cancelled it a few years later, although though the British embassy in Tehran subsequently forced the Persian government to renegotiate a marginally less draconian agreement with Reuter.¹⁰

Both world wars led to the full incarnation of British and Russian power in Iran, in the form of military occupation of Iranian territory. The two powers, who had temporarily settled their differences to become allies in both World War I and II, had a vested interest in protecting Iran's oilfields from the reach of Imperial and Nazi Germany. Since an Anglo-Russian rapprochement in 1907, Britain and Russia had divided Iran into two respective spheres of influence, where each could

exploit oil and mineral resources, and a third "neutral" region between the two that was "tacitly recognized as being open to British interests."¹¹ The Anglo-Russian agreement had crushed the democratic dreams of a nascent Iranian constitutionalist movement, and effectively relegated Iran to a British protectorate after a temporary interruption of Russian influence during the Russian Revolution.¹² The largely-bloodless coup that brought British-backed Reza Pahlavi to the throne in 1925 led to a modernizing, centralizing, and secularizing reign that eventually proved too independent for British tastes.^{13 14} Attempts to reduce British control of Iran's oil reserves by choosing to receive technical assistance from

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German and Italian instead of British engineers led to British and Allied uneasiness toward the Shah's Nazi sympathies.¹⁵ The subsequent Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran and overthrow of Reza Pahlavi for his more malleable son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1941 led to a crisis in 1946 that emphasized the continuing quasi-colonial exploitation of the country. The Soviet Union refused for several months to evacuate its occupying troops from northern Iran, anxious to counter encroaching British and American oil interests in the technically neutral and independent country.

British and American interests

in Iran's politics received one of their strongest rebuffs to date in the 1951 election of Mohammed Mossaddegh as Iranian prime minister. Atop the new prime minister's policy agenda was a serious investigation and reform of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company — the BP ancestor company founded on predatory British concessions that a large number of Iranians saw as the primary arm of continuing "colonial arrogance" and interference in the country.¹⁶ Mossaddegh's attempts at nationalizing the Iranian oil industry — or at least allowing Iran more than the approximately 11.7% of profits it was receiving under prior agreements—were met with intransigence on the part of the British company.¹⁷ The British appealed to the United States, claiming that

Mossaddegh's government was sympathetic to communism and the Soviets. In response, the CIA initiated a clandestine operation that ended in 1953 with Mossaddegh's overthrow and permanent house arrest — a role formally admitted only in 2011, but long realized by outraged Iranians.¹⁸

The U.S.-backed removal of the democratically-elected leader of Iran had a profound impact on Iranians' views of the United States. An Iranian woman, reflecting on Mossaddegh's overthrow, remembered that the U.S. went from "the country that helped us while other countries were exploiting us" in Iranian public opinion to one that "no one in Iran ever trusted...again."¹⁹ Of no help to Americans' public image in Iran was the subsequent reinstatement of the Shah as a monarch with even more powers than he had before and an increasingly controversial and repressive regime in Tehran following the 1953 coup.²⁰ Moreover, the secular Shah's land reforms aimed at ending the political

power of Iranian imams fostered an alliance between the religious right, led by the future Ayatollah Khomeini, and Mossaddegh's secular leftist followers.²¹

The complicated stew of anti-imperialism, Islamism, nationalism, and anti-Western sentiment that came out of this prolonged history of foreign exploitation and humiliation was very rapidly brought to the surface of Iranian society and politics in late 1977 and early 1978, with mass protests and strikes against the Shah's authoritarian government paralyzing Tehran.²² By January 1979, the Shah was forced to flee to Egypt, and by March a referendum had been introduced on the question of an Islamic republic. Although the question was put forth in a way so as to sideline secularists and more liberal Islamists, an overwhelming 99 percent of Iranian referendum voters voted "yes" on Khomeini's Islamist regime.²³ Although Iran's rapid political transformation had a lasting effect on its relations with the West, it was only with the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran that damaged relations were actually "shattered" and Iran "set...on the path of isolation."²⁴ Why did this prove to be the defining point of the new Islamic Republic's foreign policy, particularly with regards to the United States? The reasons are similar to those that have justified the re-normalization of Iranian relations with its two colonial tormentors in the face of continued silence between the US and Iran. Britain, which Ayatollah Khomeini, who was Iran's supreme leader from 1979 to 1989, periodically referred to as the "Little Satan," re-established diplomatic relations with Iran in 1988.²⁵ The British embassy in Tehran, which was stormed and ransacked by protesters in 2011, re-opened a relatively short four years later in August 2015.²⁶ Although Ayatollah Khomeini often

also called the Soviet Union the "Lesser Satan," the USSR was the first country to recognize the Islamic Republic, and Russia has continually maintained an embassy in Tehran since the 1979 revolution.²⁷

For many American citizens and politicians, the 444-day-long hostage crisis still has an "emotional legacy" of "humiliating trauma" and "nihilistic hatred," and is often cited as one of the foremost reasons for continuing, unrelenting, and almost paranoid hostility toward Iran and proposals for its reintegration into the international community.²⁸ 2013's Academy Award for Best Picture *Argo*, while offering itself as "based off a true story," holds true for the most part to Americans' post-1979 stereotype of Iranians as "ugly, poor, strictly religious, fanatical, and ignorant."²⁹ Former Republican presidential candidate Scott Walker averred at his campaign kickoff speech in July 2015—over thirty-four years after the return of the hostages—that "Iran hasn't changed much since [American hostage Kevin Hermening] and the other hostages were released on President Reagan's first day in office."³⁰ Others, like former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum, claim that Iran represents "an apocalyptic version" of radical Islam "which is a death cult."³¹

The frequency with which politicians in the United States oversimplify or misrepresent Iran's social and political situation is almost on a level with Ayatollah Khamenei's pronouncements of "Death to America"—and is not helpful to a rational American foreign policy with regards to Iran. One of the most fascinating personal histories of Iran's Islamic Republic is that of Masoumeh Ebtekar, President Hassan Rouhani's vice president for environmental protection and student spokesman of notoriety in the American em-

bassy hostage crisis. The position of "vice president" in the Iranian government is roughly equivalent to that of a cabinet minister in the United States. Ebtekar, who spent six years of her childhood living in a Philadelphia suburb gaining an almost perfect American English accent, rose to prominence under the name of "Mary" during the hostage crisis as anything but a likeable figure in the eyes of the American public.³² Her experience with life in the United States seemingly made her decision to be the official spokesperson for the complete rejection of American values advocated by many elements of the revolution that much more pointed. In Rouhani's Iran, however, she has become something of a reformist, advocating for a "positive" Iranian influence "to bring stability to [the] troubled region," environmental NGOs in Tehran and freedom of expression that allow the "people into the process of governance," and the need for "not oppressing your people," in regards to Iran's Syrian ally Bashar al-Assad.³³

Ebtekar's personal history, opinions, and position in Iranian politics might suggest to some skeptical Americans that "crime does pay."³⁴ Some feel that seeing her rewarded with a position of power can only mean that the underlying organization and ideals of revolutionary Iran remain unchanged. After all, in many imaginations she remains an Iranian revolutionary "who, thirty-three years ago, helped steal 444 days out of the lives of fifty-two innocent Americans."³⁵ On the other hand, it's intriguing to look at Ebtekar's situation as symptomatic of a much larger trend. In the context of what widely-admired Harvard historian Crane Brinton theorized as "the anatomy of revolution," the stages of the former firebrand's life fall almost precisely in place with a revolution's stages of life.³⁶

The “fever” of fervor that was Brinton’s metaphor for the normal progression of revolutionary movements consisted of three stages: the instigating “raging delirium” of the revolutionaries, then the “long, fitful convalescence, often under dictatorial rule” as the fever lessens, and finally “a return to normalcy.”³⁷ In Brinton’s cases studies, this translated to the Restoration of the English monarchy after Oliver Cromwell’s rule, the return of the Bourbon dynasty to power in France after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, and Russia’s return to a repressive autocracy under Stalin.

The frenzy of a nation that enthralled Ebtekar in 1979 to act as spokesperson for a rash and impulsive attack on the United States’ embassy is hard to mistake; a more interesting and difficult question concerns Iran’s continued wallowing in the dictatorial fever of Brinton’s intermediate stage. Doubtless, there has very much been a return to a degree of pre-revolutionary “normalcy” in Iran, at least in terms of the Islamic Republic’s revival and intensification of the Shah’s atrocious human rights records.³⁸ Particularly in its relations with the West and the United States, however, Iran has stagnated in the second phase of revolution. A strict Islamic public and social morality continues to be much more stringently enforced than under the Pahlavi Shahs — who, in fact, outlawed the veil for Muslim women and actively promoted relatively lax Western standards of dress and public conduct.³⁹ The “mad religious energy” of 1979 and the first stage of revolution is clearly still a force in revolutionary Iranian society, albeit an established, institutionalized force.⁴⁰ What’s even more surprising is the apparently continuing ability of Iran’s ruling “seminary-trained clerics” to administer a semi-modern state with

tens of millions of citizens and “deal with the problems of the twentieth century.”⁴¹ Regardless of their partial delegation of powers, it’s difficult to see how Iran’s ruling Shi’a clerics “steeped in esoteric medieval writings” — including the Supreme Leader — could possibly possess the competence to tackle modern statecraft.⁴²

The answer to the riddle of the mullahs’ apparently miraculous ability to govern lies in the key alliance forged prior to the revolution between Islamism and populism. The support of liberal, pro-democratic, anti-imperialist students in Tehran certainly aided Khomeini in his rise to power; the support of Iran’s rural poor, however, was indispensable to the foundation of his theocracy.⁴³ The Islamic Republic’s ability to provide for the common people — and the association of Islamism in public opinion with the fight for “equality and social justice” — has been instrumental in its popular support. What’s more, for most of Iran’s post-1979 history, the people have had good reason to make this association. Among other moves, the theocracy reduced the Shah’s military spending by over seventy-five percent, re-routing these funds instead to social programs, reduced overall illiteracy in the country by thirty-eight percent (among women by forty-five percent), and lowered infant mortality from 104 to twenty-five per 1,000.⁴⁴

Despite the progress, Iran’s economy has, for the most part, remained wholly reliant on a single industry, leaving the popularity of the current regime vulnerable to the caprices of the world oil market—a weakness exploited by the joint US-EU economic sanction on the country targeting oil sales. As of 2012, oil continues to account for about eighty percent of

Iran’s public revenue, even though the Islamic Republic has rarely produced more than half what the last Shah did with Western aid.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ The revolutionary Islamic government’s inability to diversify economically has restrained economic growth and frustrated the country’s burgeoning and increasingly unemployed youth population: of the approximately one million new jobs needed annually to absorb Iranian youth entering the labor market, the current regime only produces about 300,000.⁴⁷ Iran’s self-propelled, oil-dependent economy can only last so long, and a government in Tehran that either cannot or simply refuses to interact with the United States in particular and the West in general can never provide the Iranian people with long-term prosperity.

Granted that the Western strategy of sanctions has detected and struck at one of the Islamic Republic’s vital supports for continued control of Iran, why should the West be considering a deal at all? The stated goals of Western leaders going into negotiations with the Iranians are to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, but bringing an end to the mullahs’ regime would certainly accomplish that goal. Putting aside the technical and economic difficulties of continuing sanctions, deal or no deal, the overly aggressive approach touted by some of the Iran deal’s enemies in the United States runs the probable risk of inadvertently strengthening another of the supports for Iran’s institutional revolutionaries — anti-Americanism.

Much support for the Iranian theocracy among its proudly patriotic citizens comes from a feeling — which very often seems justifiable — of foreign menaces to Iranian sovereignty surrounding the country. The over-

riding motivation behind the Iranian students' November 1979 storming of the American embassy in Tehran was President Carter's decision to allow the deposed Shah into the United States for medical treatment—and the concurrent fear among Iranians that the US would attempt to reinstall him on the throne.⁴⁸ Iran's official attachment to furthering its defensive capabilities is founded, according to Ebtekar, in the presence of "dozens of American military bases in the area."⁴⁹ Even Mir Hossein Mousavi, leader of the Iranian Green Movement and 2009 reformist foil to arch-conservative former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has definitively indicated that "he would not budge on Iran's right to pursue nuclear power."⁵⁰

In the modern era, the concerted and sustained hostilities of established foreign powers against youthful revolutionary movements have generally resulted less in the disintegration than the unification of those movements, as they are able to claim a degree of legitimacy as defenders of the nation. This was notably the case in France in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The War of the First Coalition, from 1792 to 1797, saw virtually every monarchy of consequence in Western Europe declare war on the nascent French democracy. Instead, however, of delivering a bloody end to French revolutionaries, the conflict instead legitimized the revolutionary regime as the protector of the nation.

Although it would be difficult and most likely inaccurate to make moral equivalents of the French revolutionaries in 1789 and their Iranian counterparts in 1979, the effect of foreign campaigns against each movement

produced remarkably similar results. The Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, saw Iraqi President Saddam Hussein receive significant covert and intelligence support from the United States, as well as the logistical support of France, Germany, Britain, and Portugal.⁵¹ Extensive aid from the West and the Arab Gulf States continued to come in the face of Iraq's open and "repeated use of nerve agents and toxic gases," as well as mustard gas, in defiance of the 1925 Geneva Accords banning such weapons.⁵² As of 2014, it was estimated that around 70,000 Iranians, both veterans and civilians,

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were currently in the process of dying from their exposure to Iraqi chemical weapons, and that total casualties related to the illegal arms may eventually rival the number killed by chemical weapons on both sides in World War I.⁵³ The effect of Western indifference and almost unanimous support to Hussein's Iraq and its usage of "weapons banned...by international norms" was just as toxic on Iranian foreign policy as the weapons themselves, boxing Iran and its revolutionary regime into the "strategic loneliness" of a pariah state that it retains for the most part to the present day.⁵⁴ Indeed, documentation proves that the Reagan Administration was fully aware that "it was

selling materials to Iraq...being used for the manufacture of chemical weapons," again in violation of international law and norms.⁵⁵

Interestingly, although Iran may or may not have had the capacity to produce chemical weapons in response to Iraq during the war, a fatwa from Ayatollah Khomeini specifically forbade their production or usage.⁵⁶ During the 2015 struggle in Congress over the Iranian nuclear accords, former President Obama also suggested that the current Ayatollah Khamenei had issued a fatwa against the production of nuclear weapons as well.⁵⁷ In any event, regardless of the accuracy or the sincerity of these prohibitions, it remains the case that a nation ostracized politically and economically for as long as Iran constitutes a free-for-all for hardliners and ultra-conservatives to gain and retain power. The status quo of the Islamic Republic's political and cultural dominance inside Iran doesn't coincidentally mirror the nearly uniform exclusion

of Iran from many important international communities and efforts. The importance of Iranian conflict with the United States to the continued power of the theocracy is convincingly indicated by Ayatollah Khamenei's post-deal exhortations to the Iranian people to "prepare for the continuation of the fight against America," in spite of feelings among Iranian moderates that "our Great Satan without sanctions is just not the same anymore."⁵⁸

Given the repeated threats from the current presidential administration to unilaterally renege on the deal and re-impose sanctions, it's hardly difficult to realize that the already poor relationship of mistrust between the Unit-

ed States and Iran is being destructively deteriorated further. It doesn't help to "negotiate from a position of strength," as former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal suggested in an interview for Iowa Public Radio in 2015, if the Iranian regime doesn't believe that the United States is being genuine in any of its demands or concessions.⁵⁹ This isn't to say that Iran should be welcomed back into the ring of nations unconditionally or spontaneously. However, to suggest that the terms of the Iran deal negotiated by former President Obama's State Department does this is simply a misrepresentation of reality. What's more, many opponents of the deal — including many in President Trump's administration — ignore that the historical context and motivation of Iran's current regime and nuclear program are reactions to the very same over-aggressive foreign policy that they preach. The long history of forceful abuse at the hands of Western powers that informs Iran's perception of the West certainly doesn't bode well for the success of a "better" deal with Iran that would overemphasize force.

Whether or not President Trump directs his administration to cancel former President Obama's landmark leap forward with Iran and with dealing with the country's nuclear program is, of course, still uncertain. Important to recognize is that the 2015 deal was not negotiated solely between the United States and Iran — Britain, France, and Germany all have stakes in sustaining cooperation between the West and the Islamic Republic as well. These three countries also have redeveloped significant business ties with Tehran in the few years since trade reopened, suggesting that cooler heads in Europe might be keener to keep the United States in line and in compliance with

its end of the nuclear deal.⁶⁰

A disproportional number of the Iran deal's opponents in the United States seem to be under the impression that Iran didn't exist before 1979, and that Iranian society has been cryogenically preserved ever since the Revolution. Foremost on their Iran agenda isn't so much the resolution of tensions with the Islamic Republic as its punishment and humiliation for the hostage crisis. A contextual approach to Iran's nuclear program is absolutely necessary to constructive and successful diplomatic policy in the areas of disarmament and anti-proliferation. The State Department under the direction of former Secretary of State Kerry and former President Obama seemed to recognize this reality — Obama couched his reasonable statement that "Iran is not going to simply dismantle its program because we demand it to do so," with the explanation that "that's not how the world works, and that's not what history shows us."⁶¹ The deal's opponents fail to learn from the history and the root causes of our unfriendly relationship with Iran, and tensions will only worsen if the resentment and fear-mongering of one-dimensional anti-deal sentiment succeeds in continuing to control American policy toward Iran.

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