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Four Myths about Iran that Continue to (Mis)Guide US Foreign Policy

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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For more than three decades, official US policy toward Iran has been to contain — if not actively roll back — the Islamic Republic's influence across the Middle East, while curbing its abilities to threaten the security and economic interests of the United States and its allies more broadly.

In pursuit of this stated policy objective, the US has relied largely on coercive means of pressure against Iran — ranging from increasingly punitive economic sanctions to targeted assassinations. The US has also consistently kept the threat of direct war on the proverbial table. In July of this year, Dennis Ross, the former diplomat and think tank expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* urging the US to make the serious threat of military attack explicit to the Iranians as a strategy to deter their development of nuclear weapons.¹

Within this broader context of US policy toward Iran, President Obama's historic nuclear deal in 2015 offered the promise of an alternative path with the Islamic Republic built around engagement and diplomacy. However, the limited scope of these negotiations and the ease with which his successor, President Donald Trump, unravelled the final agreement revealed the exceptionalism of this diplomatic approach. The default policy toward Iran remains one of "coercive containment." Indeed, the Biden Administration appears to be returning to this status quo approach despite their promises to pursue diplomacy on the nuclear issue. But does the persistence of the US's coercive approach reflect its success?

According to members of the US security and foreign policy establishment in Washington, the answer is largely "no." Many still identify Iran as a major state threat, which continues to expand its regional influence and ability to threaten broader US interests. In May 2022, the Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines testified before the US Senate that "the Iranian regime continues to threaten US interests as it tries to erode US influence in the Middle East, entrench its influence and project power in neighbouring states, and minimize threats to regime stability."²

Confronted by this paradox, we must then ask: Why does the US continue to pursue the same set of policies when they seemingly fail to achieve their stated security interests? As a political anthropologist, I set out to answer this question by trying to understand a) who is helping shape these policies and b) what ideas, assumptions, or biases they collectively promote to ensure these policies persist even in the face of their own failures.

I spent over two years conducting ethnographic research on Middle East experts based in Washington DC, most of whom work for think tanks. Many are either former or aspiring government officials, scholars who have moved into the realm of policy, and/or journalists. Through this research, I identified a number of structural factors that elevate and legitimate certain types of Iran experts, whose qualifications and conflicts of interest raise fundamental questions about the integrity of the research they produce on Iran within Washington.³ However, the problem of why the US continues to follow the same set of failed policies toward Iran extends beyond the issue of who qualifies as an Iran expert in DC. It is equally

¹ Dennis Ross, "The United States Needs a Better Strategy to Deter Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, July 6, 2022, <https://fam.ag/3cp9HYb>.

² Terri Moon Cronk, "Top Intelligence Chiefs Testify on Global Threats," *U.S. Department of Defense*, May 10, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3PTKZgg>.

³ Negar Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of Iran Expertise," *Jadiliyya*, September 4, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3e4FYnS>.

important to interrogate the ideas and biases such experts collectively and continually reinforce that ensure the status quo. In this piece, I lay out four of these biases or “myths” that ensure the US policy of coercive containment remains the prevailing approach toward Iran despite its own apparent failures.

Myth one: The Iranian government is on the verge of internal collapse

This first myth has been circulating around Washington’s foreign policy circles for decades. As famed historian Ervand Abrahamian noted after the failed 2009 uprisings in Iran, “obituaries for the Islamic Republic of Iran appeared even before it was born.”⁴ Since those protests, analysts in Washington have falsely proclaimed the imminent end of the Islamic Republic after nearly every domestic crisis or protest. In 2017, Ray Takeyh, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* entitled “It’s time to prepare for Iran’s political collapse.”⁵ Three years later, an expert at the Center for Security Policy published a piece called, “Signs Iran’s regime is facing collapse.”⁶

Not only has this popular Washington myth repeatedly been disproven with the continued survival of the Islamic Republic but it dangerously equates the aspirations of the US policy community and certain Iranian oppositional groups (most of whom live outside Iran’s borders)⁷ with the actual political conditions, desires, and capabilities of the people inside the country — for which there is much less evidence upon to make such claims.⁸ As Assal Rad has recently written, “like the story of total stability before the revolution, this analysis [of imminent collapse] appears to be driven more by the political interests of a few than an objective examination of the Islamic Republic’s internal security.”⁹

Meanwhile, the effect of this myth on policymakers in Washington is that it used repeatedly to justify policies of extreme coercion such as sanctions — what Trump called “Maximum Pressure” — which paradoxically harm and further disempower the very people these US policymakers hope will rise up to overthrow their government.

Myth two: Iran’s leaders are liars. Alternately, Iran’s leaders are apocalyptic or irrational

This second myth also predates the Islamic Republic by nearly a century, as I have tracked discursively through historical sources. In the late 19th century, US newspapers ran pieces titled “The Sly Old

4 Ervand Abrahamian, “Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived,” *Middle East Research and Information Report*, 2009, <https://bit.ly/3ASzr8x>.

5 Ray Takeyh, “It’s time to prepare for Iran’s political collapse,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 2017, <https://wapo.st/3CCT060>.

6 David Wurmser, “Signs Iran’s regime is facing collapse,” *Asia Times*, July 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3AseVdl>.

7 See: Jonathan Broder, “Iran’s Opposition Groups are Preparing for the Regime’s Collapse. Is Anyone Ready?,” *Newsweek*, August 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3PZblgG>; AFP, “Iran crown prince predicts regime will collapse within months,” *AlArabiya*, January 16, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Tm3E7h>.

8 Some of the most credible surveys that have been done inside Iran, such as the Iran Social Survey, are still limited by the challenges of trying to gather ordinary people’s opinions in a society where the government surveils and targets people for expressing precisely such views.

9 “Regime changers love to think Iran is always on the ‘brink of collapse’” *Quincy Institute*, February 11, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3PXDYL8>.

Shah”¹⁰ and “A Land of Liars: How Persians Evade the Truth,”¹¹ which tap into the familiar orientalist trope of the dishonest or deceptive “oriental.” Later, those who claimed deeper expertise in Iran repeated these racist tropes in studies that became references for the wider US policy community. Arthur Millspaugh, who effectively managed Iran’s Finance Ministry in the 1920s and again in the 1940s and later became a think tank fellow at the DC-based Brookings Institution, writes in *Americans in Persia*: “It is quite evident that liars were not objected to [in Iran...] that people who were not habitual or professional liars themselves actually seemed to prefer lies to the truth and gave more value and currency to falsehoods than facts.”¹²

These caricatures about the “dishonest Iranian” have continued to the present,¹³ though they have taken on an additional inflection of Islamophobia after 9/11, which goes further in actually denying the rationality of Iran’s leaders. Throughout my fieldwork, I came across both indirect and direct statements that portrayed Iran’s leaders as “apocalyptic” based on their religious worldviews.¹⁴ Others insist that Iran is an irrational state actor¹⁵ within the ideological confines (and biases) of international relations theory.¹⁶

Beyond the overt racism of these ideas, they serve as the primary ideological justification in Washington for opposing diplomatic relations or negotiations with Iran. If the starting premise for the American policy community is that Iran’s leaders cannot be trusted to abide by their own agreements — either because of their inherent deception or because of their inability to “rationally” assess and thereby protect their country’s interests — then what is the point of pursuing diplomacy? The fact that it was the US that unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 JCPOA agreement rather than Iran is conveniently ignored by those who support this myth.

Myth three: Ordinary Iranians do not matter politically

While many analysts and policymakers advance the (unfounded) idea that the Iranian government is on the brink of internal collapse in the face of overwhelming popular opposition to their rule, these same figures also paradoxically downplay or even dismiss the existing power the Iranian people wield in terms of influencing the policy decisions of their leaders.

¹⁰ “The Sly Old Shah,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1889, Found in ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database.

¹¹ “A Land of Liars: How Persians Evade the Truth,” *The Evening Repository*, 1886, Found in America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

¹² Arthur Millspaugh, *Americans in Persia* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1946), p. 82.

¹³ Most famously, former Undersecretary of State, Wendy Sherman, who was the lead US representative for the nuclear negotiations said that “deception was part of their DNA,” a statement for which she later apologized. However, US politicians on all sides of the political spectrum have repeated such claims.

¹⁴ One of the most cited experts upholding this myth has been Mehdi Khalaji, an Iran expert based at the WINEP. His 2008 report *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy* was often cited by other right-wing analysts and policy factions in Washington as evidence of Iran’s apocalyptic aspirations.

¹⁵ Amitai Etzioni, “Can a Nuclear-Armed Iran be deterred,” *U.S. Army*, June 29, 2010, <https://bit.ly/3CCqZLT>.

¹⁶ For more on the racist ideological foundations of the field of international relations, read: Meera Sabaratnam, “Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts,” *Millennium*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2020): pp. 3 - 31. And Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Based on my own fieldwork, I saw this most clearly through narratives that intentionally downplay the role of electoral politics inside Iran and instead present Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, as the only relevant political authority within the country. Just before the 2021 Presidential elections in Iran, Behnam Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow at the right-wing think tank, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, told CNBC, "Iran really has only one important voter ... and that's the supreme leader [...]. So you could say whoever wins, of the candidates that you mentioned ... the Iranian people will certainly lose, it doesn't matter who wins in Iran's elections."¹⁷ Analysts associated with more liberal think tanks have expressed similar sentiments, often glossing over the role of domestic political pressures or elections in terms of the shaping of Iranian foreign policy.¹⁸ As Karim Sadjadpour, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asserted during his 2013 Congressional testimony, "given that the Supreme Leader will likely retain veto power, Rouhani should not be expected to significantly alter the deeply entrenched strategic principles of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy."¹⁹

Not only does this perspective ignore the complex contestations that occur among different elite factions inside Iran,²⁰ but it also more problematically discredits the extent to which the Iranian people do put pressure on their leaders to reform or recalibrate their policies at home and abroad.²¹

Consequently, this narrow view of Iranian politics helps retain the status quo of US confrontation with Iran by presenting it as a political monolith, controlled by a single dictator who for both ideological and personal reasons opposes the US, regardless of the views of ordinary Iranians or other elites inside the country.

Myth four: Iran is the major force for destabilization in the Middle East

Every president since Ronald Reagan has identified Iran as a major (if not the primary) destabilizing force in the Middle East.

President Clinton's 1996 National Security Strategy (NSS) claimed, "Iran's support of terrorism is a primary threat to peace in the Middle East."²² Ten years later, Bush Jr.'s 2006 NSS declared "the Iranian regime sponsors terrorism; threatens Israel; seeks to thwart Middle East peace; disrupts democracy in Iraq; and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom."²³ Obama's 2010 NSS stated that "for

¹⁷ Abigail Ng, "No matter who wins Iran's election, 'the Iranian people will certainly lose,' expert says," *CNBC*, June 18, 2021, <https://cnb.cx/3Kt1ONH>.

¹⁸ Genevieve Abdo, "No Matter Who Wins, Iran's Supreme Leader Controls Foreign Policy," *Markaz Blog*, Brookings Institution, June 14, 2013, <https://brook.gs/3pQPJsw>.

¹⁹ Karim Sadjadpour, "Elections in Iran: The Regime Cementing its Control," Testimony before the U.S. House Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, June 18, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3wAOjWA>.

²⁰ For more on contestations within the Revolutionary Guard, for instance, read Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

²¹ "Roundtable: Iran's Domestic Politics and Political Economy (Part 2)," *Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative*, December 2, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CERaSS>.

²² President Bill Clinton, National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, 1996, p. 16, <https://bit.ly/3PUCvFB>.

²³ President George W. Bush, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2006, p. 20, <https://bit.ly/3Tm4sJl>.

decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has endangered the security of the region and the United States and failed to live up to its international responsibilities.”²⁴

During my fieldwork, I found that this overwhelmingly negative view of Iran’s regional role is shared by most of the policy community in Washington. Even factions and experts advocating for greater diplomacy and engagement with the Islamic Republic concede on the point that Iran is an inherently and exceptional “bad actor” in the region.²⁵

While there is plenty of evidence to show that Iran has extended its power across the Middle East — from Lebanon to Iraq to Syria to Yemen — often against the political desires and demands of various communities within these societies, Washington’s framing of Iran’s regional role as uniquely and wholly “destabilizing” is ideologically and politically misleading.

Firstly, it purposely obfuscates the central role (and responsibilities) of the US in destabilizing the region through its direct military interventions and occupations (such as in Iraq and Libya) and its continued “indirect” interventions in Yemen, Syria, and beyond. Thus, on Iraq, experts in Washington will often highlight Iran’s support for Shi’i paramilitary forces in the country as a way of explaining the ongoing insecurity inside the country and the growing discontent of the population against its government. However, in those same analyses, the US is treated as a benign or even neutral party inside Iraq rather than as its former occupier.²⁶

Similarly, this framing of Iran as the sole or primary destabilizing force actively deflects criticism of US allies like Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia for their own violent and expansionist policies. This overtly ideological narrative serves instead to portray Iran as an exceptional state situated outside its own historical, geographic, and political context — operating as an external hegemon in the Middle East rather than as a regional power with complex, contradictory, and at times, openly confrontational relationships with its regional adversaries and allies alike.

To return to the example of Iraq, US policymakers actively ignore the complicated history of trade, exchange, and also war between Iran and Iraq, framing Iran’s interests in the country as relatively recent and entirely unfounded. Thus, while Iran has undoubtedly done harm inside Iraq in pursuits of its own interests, it has also invested considerably in its neighbour,²⁷ joining various international, regional, and humanitarian efforts to further stabilize and secure its neighbour (including the fight against the Islamic State.) In US policy circles, however, such policies are not treated as normal relations or exchanges between neighbouring states but further proof of Iran’s aggressive regional role.²⁸

24 President Barack Obama, National Security Strategy, 2010, p. 4, <https://bit.ly/3TIELIK>.

25 Rebecca Klar, “Pelosi calls Iran ‘bad actor’ but not equivalent to Russia on election interference,” *The Hill*, October 22, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Q0bO2e>; Suzanne Maloney, “Iran Is a Dangerous Actor in a Volatile Area of the World,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/3Kp3yYk>.

26 See for instance: Tony Badran, “Crisis of the Iranian Order,” *Hoover Institute*, March 10, 2020, <https://hvr.co/3KufQIW>.

27 Maziar Motamedi, “Iran says deal reached to unlock funds frozen in Iraq,” *Al Jazeera*, October 12, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pNrknF> Iran and Iraq sign tourism deal,” *Al-Monitor*, June 13, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ARkFyP>.

28 Ahmed Ali, Michael Knights, and Michael Eisenstadt, “Iran’s Influence in Iraq,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 6, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3pQtDpO>; Tamer Badawi, “Iran’s Economic Leverage in Iraq,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 23, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3KoJUMg>.



Ultimately, these four overlapping myths about Iran continue to dominate policy discourse in Washington to the point of narrowing and even silencing real debate about US policy options toward Iran. Even if a nuclear deal is reached once more, the overarching US policy of coercive containment will likely persist until enough voices in Washington address and dismantle these problematic myths.