

Is Washington paying-off Teheran with nuclear coin?

written by David M. Weinberg | 30.08.2024

Why is it that Iran and Hezbollah have not retaliated significantly (or at least, not yet) to the targeted assassinations of Faud Shukr in Beirut and Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran?

Part of the answer is Israel's explicit threat to wreak devastation on these enemies if they escalate the conflict, and part is the unprecedented American naval presence in the region, backing up Israel. For the moment, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei apparently have been deterred from escalating the conflict.

True, Hezbollah attempted to prick central Israel earlier this week, and both enemies are still seeking to reciprocally assassinate Israeli leaders. But the massive regional conflagration and even broader world war that was feared a month ago seems to have dissipated.

I strongly suspect that a central reason for this is a US payoff, meaning that Washington is luring these bad actors with strategic coin, by negotiating with them to reach long-term understandings about their "legitimate" sway in the region.

That is the only possible explanation for the dramatic announcement this week by Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei (Iran's "supremely disturbed leader," as Prof. Gil Troy has monikered him) that Iran is now willing to resume nuclear talks with the US - something Khamenei has adamantly and angrily refused to consider since US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action deal in 2018.

US PRESIDENT Joe Biden has all but begged Khamenei for the past four years to re-engage or renegotiate the JCPOA, to no avail. In response, Khamenei riotously mocked Biden, defiantly ramped-up Iran's nuclear enrichment and weaponization work, repeatedly defied international nuclear inspectors, and spoke more openly than ever before about developing nuclear weapons to destroy Israel.

So why the current turnabout? Because in semi-secret talks with Iran that have taken place in Qatar and Oman, Washington may have baited Tehran in pursuit of grand regional de-escalation.

America is seeking a grand deal that will avoid both a broader Iran-Israel war and a Hezbollah-Israel war, end Iranian militia attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria, end Houthi attacks on international shipping off the coast of Yemen, and magically facilitate a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

To achieve all this, I deduce that the US is now offering profligate nuclear concessions to Iran, including more sanctions relief and a fluid-dangerous redefinition of the nuclear threshold.

Of course, such US understandings with Iran won't remove Iranian nuclear or hegemonic threats, but rather kick the can down the road - leaving Iran as a long-term problem for Israel and Sunni countries, and punting the problem to a different administration farther off in the future.

IN NORMAL TIMES, news of Khamenei's willingness to reengage the US in nuclear talks would have been above-the-fold lead news in every newspaper in the world, and even more so here in Israel.

But because the media is obsessed with the day-by-day ups and downs in hostage negotiations (even though the entire exercise is, sadly and probably, an exercise in self-deception), and is consumed by daily accounts of IDF fighting on various war fronts - Khamenei's bombshell statement has barely rated back-page mention.

"For our plans, we should not wait for approval by the enemies," Khamenei said in a video broadcast by Iranian state television. By "enemies" he meant the US. "We do not have to pin our hope to the enemy..." but "it is not contradictory to engage the same enemy in some places - there's no barrier."

And note: In a meeting this week between Khamenei and the new Iranian cabinet headed by President Masoud Pezeshkian, guess who showed up? Former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who negotiated the JCPOA back in 2015; this tells me that Iran senses an opening to renewed "understandings" with the US, a development that can only be viewed with the greatest concern in Israel.

But what is needed today are not soft understandings between Washington and Tehran, but rather a strategic reset based on overwhelming American power and determination. As the dominant global superpower, and as Israel's ally, it is incumbent on the US to neutralize the Iranian nuclear juggernaut, to counter Iran's hegemonic march across the region, and to thwart Iran's dangerous proxies (the three H's: Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis).

HOW CAN America ignore the fact that Iran is establishing air and naval bases on the Mediterranean and Red seas, and especially in Syria, to project regional power? Or that the belligerent Islamic Republic seeks control of the Horn of Africa and the entrance to the Red Sea - a critical strategic choke point on international shipping; and through the Houthis, it has brought about a 70% drop in shipping from Asia to the West through the Suez Canal?

How can Washington ignore the fact that Iran is fomenting subversion in Mideast countries that are Western allies, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan?

(It is particularly focused on destabilizing the Hashemite regime in Jordan to gain access to Israel's longest border and from there to penetrate the Jewish state's heartland - and given the massive amounts of top-tier weaponry the IDF is discovering in Jenin and Tulkarm, it seems that Iran has been succeeding in this.)

How can Washington ignore the fact that Iran is sponsoring terrorism against Western, Israeli, and Jewish targets around the world, including unambiguous funding, logistical support, planning and personnel for terrorist attacks that span the globe, from Buenos Aires to Burgas?

How can Washington ignore the fact that Iran is providing Russia with armed attack drones for President Putin's war against Ukraine, or the fact that (according to the US Director of National Intelligence!) Iran is funding protests against Israel (and against America) on college campuses across the US?

And most of all, how can Washington ignore the fact that, according to the IAEA, Iran has enriched uranium to near-bomb-ready levels (84%, which is very close to the 90% level necessary for a nuclear weapon) and is accumulating weapons-grade uranium for production of an estimated five nuclear weapons within three months?

GIVEN ALL THIS, "de-escalation" with Iran seems to be the wrong goal. From

Israel's long-term perspective – especially after the October 7 attack, Hezbollah's entry into the war, and Iran's attempts to ignite a third intifada in Judea and Samaria – escalation of the confrontation with Iran is inevitable, and at this point perhaps even preferable.

“Peace Now” is not a realistic option

Indeed, it has dawned on most Israelis and Israeli leaders that Israel faces a decade of war of attrition against Iran and its proxy armies, and that an escalation in combat with these enemies is necessary, not something to be shied away from. “Peace Now” is neither a realistic nor advantageous option in diplomatic or military terms. Peace (or at least stability) might come much later, if at all, following decisive victories over the Iranian camp.

In short, Israel cannot live with an Iranian “ring of fire” around its neck. Washington should not countenance this either, especially since Iran's jihad is not just to strangle Israel but to subdue the US, too.

Alas, the Obama-Biden (and perhaps Harris) administrations in Washington evidently see the US role in the region differently. They have been and are still seeking to reset the region through conciliation with Iran: through compromise and concession, not confrontation. This completely ignores the fact that Iran does not hide its overarching revolutionary and genocidal ambitions – to export its brand of radical Islamism globally, to dominate the region, and to destroy Israel.

Considering Khamenei's announcement, and Nasrallah's relative quietude, one must wonder what the Biden-Harris duo is promising them in exchange for their restraint. And one must wonder what Israel will have to “pay” for the de-escalation package Washington is crafting, beyond the handcuffs that the US has already slapped onto Israeli military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah.

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