



Rand H. Fishbein

Rand H. Fishbein, Ph.D., is president of Fishbein Associates, Inc., a public policy consulting firm based in Potomac, Maryland. He is a former professional staff member (majority) of both the US Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations and Defense Appropriations subcommittees and worked as special assistant for national security affairs to the late Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii. Dr. Fishbein also served as one of two foreign policy/intelligence analysts on the US Senate Committee Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair.



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Mollifying the Mullahs: A Fool's Errand

05/06/2021



There was a young lady of Niger / Who smiled as she rode on a tiger; / They returned from the ride / With the lady inside, / And the smile on the face of the tiger. - William Cosmo Monkhouse

The word swirling around Washington is that the Biden administration, possibly in cooperation with the UK government, is set to strike a deal with Iran for the release of two American and two British hostages. One report out of Iran suggests that up to \$7 billion in frozen funds could be the price exacted by the mullahs in Tehran for their return.^[1]

At the same time, a similar game of bait-and-humiliate is being played out in the nuclear arena where, once again, Iran is threatening to accelerate its enrichment of weapons-grade uranium unless the US agrees to lift all sanctions against the rogue regime. Incredibly, the administration believes that a return to the failed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is the key to restraining Iran's ambition to dominate the Middle East. They could not be more wrong.

Nothing in Iran's malevolent conduct over the last 40 years would suggest that it has any interest in moderating its behavior. On the contrary, Tehran's ever-expanding global terror network, unprovoked attacks on shipping, cyber-hacking, and unrelenting support for militant Islamic insurgent groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, reveal its true intentions.

Since first being declared a state-sponsor of terrorism by the US State Department in 1984, thousands of Americans have either died or been injured at the hands of Iran and its proxies. Adding to this grim tally have been thousands of others across Europe, South America, Asia and Africa who have fallen victim to the regime's unrelenting global jihad.

Even so, the impulse to mollify the mullahs remains strong in some quarters of the US national

security establishment. Most fervent among them are those associated with the Obama and Biden administrations. In 2015 the Obama team agreed to secretly transfer \$1.7 billion^[2] in unmarked currency to the regime while, at the same time, unfreezing assets in tranches estimated at upwards of \$150 billion.^[3]

In a mocking rebuke to the US, estimates are that Iran now plows as much as \$1 billion of this windfall annually into its terrorist operations.^[4] A sizable portion of these funds go to attacking Israel through Syria and Lebanon, leaving both of these war-torn countries in utter ruin. Contrary to the best-laid plans of the Obama team, the Iranian regime has had no epiphany on the road to Damascus. Instead of curbing Tehran's seemingly insatiable appetite for violence, former President Barack Obama's policies actually have encouraged and enabled it.

The Iranians are playing for larger stakes, where the messianic aspirations of Shi'a Islam are fused with a uniquely Persian version of manifest destiny. The mullahs believe that hegemony over the Middle East is their birthright, conferred by the Persian kings who dominated the region two-and-a-half millennia ago.

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This ancient zeitgeist, coupled with the desire to extend Islamic sovereignty over territory held by non-believers and apostates, serves as a powerful impulse to acquire nuclear weapons. In Iranian eyes, any agreement that compromises that objective must be opposed. The regime's legitimacy rests, in part, on its adherence to this national aspiration.

If all of this sounds familiar, it is because Iran, like its fellow autocratic regimes, China, Russia and North Korea, smells blood in the wind. America is weak because its leader is weak. Social unrest is tearing at the very fabric of the country. Even America's fabled military is unsure of its mission.

When the Iranian leadership looks at the US, it sees "a house divided against itself," exhausted from the pandemic and decades of foreign wars. Even great civic institutions that have formed the bedrock of the republic for 230 years have fallen into disrepute. To America's enemies, these are the unmistakable signs of a superpower in precipitous decline.

Playing out today on the international stage is the law of the Serengeti. Predators who survive on red meat never will be satiated by green pastures or placated by hollow threats. Predictably, the very act of negotiating over hostages only encourages more hostage taking, invariably making America a de facto captive of Iranian machinations.

Washington has yet to learn that ancient cultures are not easily bent to its will. Every act of appeasement is viewed as weakness, every retreat from the use of force as cowardice, and every secret deal as a display of shame. For Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the thugs who preside over the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, public displays of diplomatic niceties are mere feints intended to disguise true objectives; and like a snake's rattle, they are meant to incite fear and buy time until a fatal blow can be struck.

The mullahs know President Joe Biden well and fear him not. Battle-hardened and convinced of their own invincibility, the mullahs surely view this doddering and often incoherent geriatric president in much the same way a lion would see an aged antelope struggling to keep up with the herd: dinner. America, enfeebled by wokeness and racked by self-doubt, is not the unassailable power it once was.

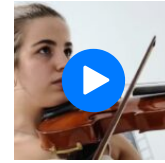
If "leverage" is the sine qua non of diplomacy, it is difficult to see how eviscerating the sanctions regime meticulously reconstituted by Donald Trump will result in anything but the enabling of further Iranian treachery against the West. President Biden's naive approach toward the despotic Iranian regime makes high-intensity war more likely, not less.

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The administration would be wise to heed the lessons of history. Treat Iran as Churchill treated the Axis powers, as implacable foes, inured to conflict and deaf to entreaties for peaceful coexistence. Only a clear red line, backed by resolute force, will ensure that Iran never acquires a deliverable nuclear weapons capability. The business of appeasing tyrants, as Neville Chamberlain learned to his eternal shame, can be a perilous occupation.

[1] Becket, Stefan, "Klain says reports of deal with Iran for release of American hostages 'not true,'" [CBS News](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ron-klain-iran-american-hostages-face-the-nation/), May 2, 2021, 11:21 AM. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ron-klain-iran-american-hostages-face-the-nation/>

[2] Solomon, Jay, "US Payment of \$1.7 Billion to Iran Raises Questions of Ransom," [The Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-payment-of-1-7-billion-to-iran-raises-questions-of-ransom-1453421778), January 21, 2016, 7:16 pm ET. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-payment-of-1-7-billion-to-iran-raises-questions-of-ransom-1453421778>

[3] Senate Hearing 114-533, "Examining the Terrorism Financing Risks of Allowing the Islamic Republic of Iran to Gain Access to Large Amounts of Hard Currency and The US Government's Payments of \$1.7 Billion in Foreign Cash to Iran," September 21, 2016, Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security and International Trade and Finance of the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, US Senate, [US Government Publishing Office](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg23439/html/CHRG-114shrg23439.htm), Washington, DC, 2017. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg23439/html/CHRG-114shrg23439.htm>

[4] House Hearing, "The Iran Nuclear Deal and Its Impact on Terrorism Financing," Hearing Before the Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing of the Committee on Financial Services, US House of Representatives, 114th Congress, First Session, July 22, 2015, Serial No. 114-44. Washington, DC, 2016. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhr97157/html/CHRG-114hhr97157.htm>

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