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The Breakdown of the Iran Nuclear Deal – Global Perspectives

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About the speaker

Our third speaker today, and last speaker today, is Jamal Abdi. He's the president of the National Iranian American Council and leading the council's effort to monitor policies and legislation and to educate and advocate on behalf of the Iranian American community. His previous work was in the US Congress as policy advisor on foreign policy, national security, immigration issues and defence. Jamal has written for The New York Times, CNN, Foreign Policy, The Hill, USA Today and blogs for the Huffington Post. He's a frequent guest and he's a contributor in print, radio and television, including appearance on Al Jazeera, NPR, BBC radio and BOA. Jamal, thank you for joining us today.

Intervention by Jamal Abdi

Thank you for having me. My pleasure. Good morning, good afternoon, good evening to all the folks that are joining in.

So, I don't know if I have a more optimistic take, but let's talk this through and figure out where we are. So, I actually think that there's this old adage that says, "In order to end a war you need to elect a general or a warrior." And they have the political space and the know-how to actually make peace, whereas the more stereotypical candidate who is a peace candidate will have less capital to be able to do that. I don't necessarily agree with this, but I actually think we're in a position now where, in order to end a con game, you have to elect a con man, and I think that's where we are with Donald Trump.

I think US policy in the Middle East has been a con game for many years now. And Donald Trump is so flagrantly transparently transactional that he's really exposed the lie of what motivates US foreign policy. So, for instance, for years all we heard about in Washington was the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, that Iran's nuclear program needed to be removed or rolled-back, that this was the greatest threat facing America and the world. And in getting the nuclear deal, the talk transitioned to all the other activities that Iran was engaged with that were supposedly against the United States interests. And the importance of the nuclear issue completely faded away. And I think Donald Trump, by exiting the nuclear deal as well as some of the things that we found out he was doing with Saudi Arabia regarding potentially giving them this nuclear program, really exposed that the entire concern about a nuclear-armed Iran and non-proliferation that was so trumped up, was actually about something other than non-proliferation. And I think that what this has reinforced is that the United States no longer understands what our interests in the Middle East are. A lot of what happens there is by inertia. It is how things have been done and it's how our political system has absorbed the various interests that are playing a role in this policy. And so as a result we get whatever the machine spits out. For Donald Trump, I think that he has disregarded some of the past arguments for how we deal in the region. So, in the past we've had arguments about human rights, we had George W Bush who made the human rights case for the need to topple Saddam, or we talked about national security and the supposed War on Terror and the need to have a US presence in the Middle East in order to confront those threats.

Yet we often find that the US is on the side of Salafi terrorist groups and very close with Saudi Arabia which is spreading Wahhabism. And so we find ourselves on the wrong side of that argument. Then we have



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cheap energy, which I think Donald Trump is very much in favour of, but for him the bottom line is transactional, and it is that he considers himself America's top salesman. When he interacts with players in the Middle East he's either doing it for domestic political gain, such as the ham-fisted embrace of Netanyahu which I think he has calculated will engender support within the pro-Israel and American Jewish community as well as with evangelicals which is a big part of his base. With Saudi Arabia he actually, literally, when MBS came to Washington last year, had a chart of the sales, the weapons sales that the United States brings in from Saudi Arabia, all the money that we make off of selling weapons in Saudi Arabia. And in a very thinly veiled way sent this message that I'm a Salesman and this relationship with Saudi Arabia, it's all about making these sales. And so I think that with the Iran deal, when Donald Trump actually was a candidate, his opposition to the deal, when he started to be asked to stand behind important podiums and talk about the Iran deal which, this is 2015, this is when Congress was looking at the deal, this is when there was a big vote on whether to accept the deal or not here in the United States, and Donald Trump's chief criticism of the JCPOA was not that it didn't do enough on non-proliferation, not even this talking point that it supposedly gave the Iranian government all this money to continue its malign activity, Donald Trump's major grievance was that the deal would allow Iran to buy weapons from countries like Russia and not from America. And so America wasn't making the sale off of this deal. This is the worldview of Trump. It's completely transactional.

What I think has happened is that by pulling out of the deal, and by embracing the Saudis and the Israelis as closely as he has, initially he sent shockwaves through the region. And if you try to understand what a Trump doctrine is in the Middle East I think you have to start from the Obama doctrine, because a lot of what he does is reactionary to Obama. But for Obama really he had a legitimate interest which is non-proliferation. I think that's a legitimate interest for the Middle East. I think that serves US interests, I think that serves global interests and I think that was at the core but his aspirational doctrine was for Iran and Saudi Arabia to figure out how to share the region and, essentially, how to, if not balance these two powers, how to end the proxy war between them and how to figure out a way that you can actually turn the contest in the region into one that is not zero-sum but one in which there are mutual interests for the various sides to actually participate in something collaborative. And what I think really motivated Obama on this was non-proliferation on one side but also extricating the United States from this region in which so much had been invested, so many resources, these wars that have been fought, and with little understanding of what is the actual interest that the United States is securing by making these investments. That was what the Iran deal for Obama was about. It was about trying to level the playing field so that the United States could begin to actually talk to, not just one side of this conflict, but to be able to talk to both sides, and eventually to be able to have the sides talk to one another and create some sort of balance in the region that could end this destabilizing back-and-forth and proxy war that we're seeing.

What Trump did when he entered office was really in reaction to that. The domestic political interest in the United States was to completely up-end what Obama had tried to do and, instead of signalling that the United States could deal with Iran and could actually be on both sides of this contest, he embraced the Saudis and the Gulf states and Israel and sent this message that Obama was just a blip on the radar, what he was doing was an outlier, and that the United States was fully behind our allies, unquestionably behind them, and because we're so close to them our interest in the Middle East is about countering Iran. And so in almost a, again I use the term, ham-fisted with Trump. It's so deliberate it's so, egregious how much he tried to rebalance towards the Saudis and the Israelis, and this led to this policy that was really bold and impactful, I think. Not in a good way. But withdrawing from the Iran deal, nobody expected if a Republican



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president got elected, nobody expected that they were actually, literally going to tear up the deal, even though these promises were made on the campaign stages. I think the common understanding was that if a Republican got elected to the presidency in 2016 that they would enforce the deal so aggressively that it would actually reduce Iran's incentives to continue complying and would actually trigger the Iranians to break ranks and to begin to break out of the deal, because they weren't getting the benefits. What Trump did was he actually just left the deal and did it in a way that was unprovoked which engendered opposition from our European allies who worked so hard to try to get a follow-on agreement that would satisfy some of the additional concerns that critics of the JCPOA had been raising, and really it flipped on its head what the previous paradigm had been in which Iran was the isolated party, and it was the United States and the P5+1 and really much of the international community on the same page about how to confront Iran. Now, Trump has made the United States into that pariah and Iran actually has a lot of the capital and trust of the Europeans and the other permanent five UN Security Council members. And so what the United States has been trying to do over this time was actually to do what the plan was, but in reverse. They left the deal and have been imposing sanctions that have made it increasingly untenable for Iran to continue to honour this deal in which they continue to make their compromises but are not receiving any of the benefit of their bargain. And so that's what we are now seeing, with Iran gradually exiting elements of the nuclear deal. This is very much intended to send a signal to Europe as well as to the United States that imposing these sanctions, denying Iran the benefit of the bargain, is going to come with its own cost. And we also see Iran escalating with some of its military operations. Now I don't you know if there's any smoking gun about who is responsible for the attack on the Saudi oil installation, or whether the US drone was in Iranian airspace or not, but I think it's undeniable that Iran has taken steps to put pressure on the US and its allies in the region. And I think that Iran likely its fingerprints are on the Aramco attack in one regard or another. And this is intended to send a message to the United States that there's a cost for these actions, and if we have nothing to lose we can escalate and make life painful for you.

The Trump administration's response to this: so they put this bold policy forward, they pulled out of the deal, they're doing these big sweeping things in the region, when finally tested, when after the drone was downed or after the Aramco attack, Donald Trump blinked. A lot of his advisors hoped that this would then be the spark that brought the United States into a military confrontation with Iran, and people like John Bolton who had been calling for this military confrontation for years were chomping at the bit to move on with this next step and actually trigger this military engagement. And Donald Trump by pulling back, by deciding not to strike Iran and by deferring to the Saudis on how to respond to the second incident, I think sent a message to US allies in the region who for so long had been able to conduct aggressive policy aimed at Iran without any repercussions because they had the United States behind them as a sort of insurance policy, as a sort of bully in the back of the room who could be brought in to settle any scores should the Iranians try to retaliate. Trump has exposed that lie, exposed that as a bluff, and I think that has put pressure. I mean as destabilizing as I think Trump has been in the region, by pulling back on this military action I think that has actually put pressure on the Saudis, the Emiratis to begin to pursue more pragmatic approaches. And so that's why you start to see the Emiratis open up dialogue with Iran about safety of navigation and pulling back in Yemen and now there are murmurs from the Saudis that they're looking at diplomatic engagement with Iran. And I think what that does is it actually removes the most destabilizing element of the Middle East, which was the United States putting its hand on the scale on behalf of our Persian Gulf allies, and by taking our hand off it has forced a more pragmatic reckoning of how do you actually address these challenges.



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I think with that being said, it's an extremely risky approach and it's also an accidental approach, so you shouldn't give too much credit to Donald Trump. The question now is, okay, how do you extricate the United States from this mess they've made with the Iran deal? How do you ensure that by the next election in 2020 Iran hasn't fully broken out of the JCPOA and we're back in a situation where Iran is within a month of having the ability to break out and develop nuclear weapons if it so chose? And there are many indications that there's an opportunity for the US and Iran to actually come back to the table and figure out a way to cobble this thing back together. So far the blockage is, if you just look at what happened at the UN, the blockage is that for Trump there's an unwillingness to actually meet this Iranian demand that the US re-enter the JCPOA, or at a minimum suspend some of these sanctions, in order for negotiations to happen. I think that's a legitimate demand by Iran, because we think about all the trust that was necessary in order to get the JCPOA in the first place and now how much of that trust has been shaken by the US pulling out of that deal, and how much that impacts the domestic political calculation inside of Iran, how difficult it makes it for advocates of engagement to actually pursue engagement with the United States after having been embarrassed and humiliated by Trump leaving the deal.

So the ask that the United States returns to its obligation is one that is probably understood and supported, at least in private, by the international community, and for the United States the question is: how does Trump actually get to that point? How does Trump save face and relent on this maximum pressure campaign. And I think that there's a little bit of a positive indication on that front. So for much of the Trump administration there had been efforts to negotiate a prisoner swap to free Americans held in Iran and to release Iranians held in the United States, and the Trump administration's response to that had been to shut down the conversation and what they said was that we are engaged in a maximum pressure policy, that is an all-or-nothing policy, and any relenting, any pulling back, even if it's a matter of a humanitarian channel to facilitate a prisoner swap, that is counter to maximum pressure. And so we will not engage in those conversations.

Now, with the shuffling of the Trump administration, with the realization that maximum pressure, as dire as it may make the situation inside of Iran economically, humanitarian, otherwise, that's not going to lead to what some inside and outside the Trump administration thought was going to happen, which was that the populace was going to rise up and either put so much pressure on the Iranian government that they were going to relent and completely bend over for the United States, or that the regime would become completely destabilized. And I think that that fantasy is now something that is recognized as being just that and it's not going to happen. So, now the administration is trying to grapple with, okay, we have maximum pressure here, it's not working, and we're seeing rising escalations and counter pressure from Iran, and Iran may fully break out of the JCPOA within the next year, how do we actually fix this thing? And so I think what happens in the next few weeks and months is going to be really important. I think for us it's a matter of figuring out, okay, how do you get the United States to come back to the table to honour its JCPOA obligations, and then what do you do next? How do you actually build the confidence to bring us back to where we were where the JCPOA is the floor and there's opportunities for further engagement and potentially even engagement with other players in the region on how to stabilize the region and address legitimate goals like non-proliferation.