

By Noam Chomsky

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Throughout the world there is great relief and optimism about the nuclear deal reached in Vienna between Iran and the P5+1 nations, the five veto-holding members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany. Most of the world apparently shares the assessment of the U.S. Arms Control Association that “the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action establishes a strong and effective formula for blocking all of the pathways by which Iran could acquire material for nuclear weapons for more than a generation and a verification system to promptly detect and deter possible efforts by Iran to covertly pursue nuclear weapons that will last indefinitely.”

There are, however, striking exceptions to the general enthusiasm: the United States and its closest regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. One consequence of this is that U.S. corporations, much to their chagrin, are prevented from flocking to Tehran along with their European counterparts. Prominent sectors of U.S. power and opinion share the stand of the two regional allies and so are in a state of virtual hysteria over “the Iranian threat.” Sober commentary in the United States, pretty much across the spectrum, declares that country to be “the gravest threat to world peace.” Even supporters of the agreement here are wary, given the exceptional gravity of that threat. After all, how can we trust the Iranians with their terrible record of aggression, violence, disruption, and deceit?

Opposition within the political class is so strong that public opinion has shifted quickly from [significant support](#) for the deal to an [even split](#)

. Republicans are almost unanimously opposed to the agreement. The current Republican primaries illustrate the proclaimed reasons. Senator Ted Cruz, considered one of the intellectuals among the crowded field of presidential candidates,

[warns](#) that Iran may still be able to produce nuclear weapons and could someday use one to set off an Electro Magnetic Pulse that “would take down the electrical grid of the entire eastern seaboard” of the United States, killing “tens of millions of Americans.”

The two most likely winners, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, are battling over whether to bomb Iran [immediately after](#) being elected or after the [first Cabinet meeting](#)

. The one candidate with some foreign policy experience, Lindsey Graham, [describes](#) the deal as “a death sentence for the state of Israel,” which will certainly come as a [surprise](#) to Israeli [intelligence](#) and strategic analysts -- and which Graham knows to be utter nonsense, raising immediate questions about actual motives.

Keep in mind that the Republicans long ago abandoned the pretense of functioning as a normal congressional party. They have, as respected conservative political commentator Norman Ornstein of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute [observed](#), become a “radical insurgency” that scarcely seeks to participate in normal congressional politics.

Since the days of President Ronald Reagan, the party leadership has plunged so far into the pockets of the very rich and the corporate sector that they can attract votes only by mobilizing parts of the population that have not previously been an organized political force. Among them are extremist evangelical Christians, now probably a majority of Republican voters; remnants of the former slave-holding states; nativists who are terrified that “they” are taking our white Christian Anglo-Saxon country away from us; and others who turn the Republican primaries into spectacles remote from the mainstream of modern society -- though not from the mainstream of the most powerful country in world history.

The departure from global standards, however, goes far beyond the bounds of the Republican radical insurgency. Across the spectrum, there is, for instance, general agreement with the [“pragmatic” conclusion](#) of General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the Vienna deal does not “prevent the United States from striking Iranian facilities if officials decide that it is cheating on the agreement,” even though a unilateral military strike is “far less likely” if Iran behaves.

Former Clinton and Obama Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross typically recommends that “Iran must have no doubts that if we see it moving towards a weapon, that would trigger the use of force” even after the termination of the deal, when Iran is theoretically free to do what it wants. In fact, the existence of a termination point 15 years hence is, he adds, “the greatest single problem with the agreement.” He also suggests that the U.S. provide Israel with [specially](#)

[outfitted B-52 bombers](#)

and bunker-busting bombs to protect itself before that terrifying date arrives.

“The Greatest Threat”

Opponents of the nuclear deal charge that it does not go far enough. Some supporters agree, [holding that](#)

“if the Vienna deal is to mean anything, the whole of the Middle East must rid itself of weapons of mass destruction.” The author of those words, Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif, added that “Iran, in its national capacity and as current chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement [the governments of the large majority of the world’s population], is prepared to work with the international community to achieve these goals, knowing full well that, along the way, it will probably run into many hurdles raised by the skeptics of peace and diplomacy.” Iran has signed “a historic nuclear deal,” he continues, and now it is the turn of Israel, “the holdout.”

Israel, of course, is one of the three nuclear powers, along with India and Pakistan, whose weapons programs have been abetted by the United States and that refuse to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Zarif was referring to the regular five-year NPT review conference, which ended in failure in April when the U.S. (joined by Canada and Great Britain) once again blocked efforts to move toward a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone in the Middle East. Such efforts have been led by Egypt and other Arab states for 20 years. As Jayantha Dhanapala and Sergio Duarte, leading figures in the promotion of such efforts at the NPT and other U.N. agencies, [observe](#) in “Is There a Future for the NPT?,” an article in the journal of the Arms Control Association: “The successful adoption in 1995 of the resolution on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East was the main element of a package that permitted the indefinite extension of the NPT.” The NPT, in turn, is the most important arms control treaty of all. If it were adhered to, it could end the scourge of nuclear weapons.

Repeatedly, implementation of the resolution has been blocked by the U.S., most recently by President Obama in 2010 and again in 2015, as Dhanapala and Duarte point out, “on behalf of a state that is not a party to the NPT and is widely believed to be the only one in the region possessing nuclear weapons” -- a polite and understated reference to Israel. This failure, they hope, “will not be the coup de grâce to the two longstanding NPT objectives of accelerated progress on nuclear disarmament and establishing a Middle Eastern WMD-free zone.”

A nuclear-weapons-free Middle East would be a straightforward way to address whatever threat Iran allegedly poses, but a great deal more is at stake in Washington's continuing sabotage of the effort in order to protect its Israeli client. After all, this is not the only case in which opportunities to end the alleged Iranian threat have been undermined by Washington, raising further questions about just what is actually at stake.

In considering this matter, it is instructive to examine both the unspoken assumptions in the situation and the questions that are rarely asked. Let us consider a few of these assumptions, beginning with the most serious: that Iran is the gravest threat to world peace.

In the U.S., it is a virtual cliché among high officials and commentators that Iran wins that grim prize. There is also a world outside the U.S. and although its views are not reported in the mainstream here, perhaps they are of some interest. According to the leading western polling agencies (WIN/Gallup International), the prize for “greatest threat” is [won by](#) the United States. The rest of the world regards it as the gravest threat to world peace by a large margin. In second place, far below, is Pakistan, its ranking probably inflated by the Indian vote. Iran is ranked below those two, along with China, Israel, North Korea, and Afghanistan.

“The World's Leading Supporter of Terrorism”

Turning to the next obvious question, what in fact is the Iranian threat? Why, for example, are Israel and Saudi Arabia trembling in fear over that country? Whatever the threat is, it can hardly be military. Years ago, U.S. intelligence informed Congress that Iran has very low military expenditures by the standards of the region and that its strategic doctrines are defensive -- designed, that is, to deter aggression. The U.S. intelligence community has also [reported](#) that it has no evidence Iran is pursuing an actual nuclear weapons program and that “Iran's nuclear program and its willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy.”

The authoritative [SIPRI review](#) of global armaments ranks the U.S., as usual, way [in the lead](#) in military expenditures. China comes in second with about one-third of U.S. expenditures. Far below are Russia and Saudi Arabia, which are nonetheless well above any western European state. Iran is [scarcely mentioned](#)

. Full details are provided in an

[April report](#)

from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which finds “a conclusive case that the Arab Gulf states have... an overwhelming advantage of Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms.”

Iran’s military spending, for instance, is a fraction of Saudi Arabia’s and far below even the spending of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Altogether, the Gulf Cooperation Council states -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE -- [outspend](#) Iran on arms by a factor of eight, an imbalance that goes back decades. The CSIS report adds: “The Arab Gulf states have acquired and are acquiring some of the most advanced and effective weapons in the world [while] Iran has essentially been forced to live in the past, often relying on systems originally delivered at the time of the Shah.” In other words, they are virtually obsolete. When it comes to Israel, of course, the imbalance is even greater. Possessing the most advanced U.S. weaponry and a virtual offshore military base for the global superpower, it also has a huge stock of nuclear weapons.

To be sure, Israel faces the “existential threat” of Iranian pronouncements: Supreme Leader Khamenei and former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad famously threatened it with destruction. [Except](#) that [they didn’t](#) -- and if they had, it would be of little moment. Ahmadinejad, for instance, predicted that “under God’s grace [the Zionist regime] will be wiped off the map.” In other words, he hoped that regime change would someday take place. Even that falls far short of the direct calls in both Washington and Tel Aviv for regime change in Iran, not to speak of the actions taken to implement regime change. These, of course, go back to the actual “regime change” of 1953, when the U.S. and Britain organized a military coup to overthrow Iran’s parliamentary government and install the dictatorship of the Shah, who proceeded to amass one of the worst human rights records on the planet.

These crimes were certainly known to readers of the reports of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, but not to readers of the U.S. press, which has devoted plenty of space to Iranian human rights violations -- but only since 1979 when the Shah’s regime was overthrown. (To check the facts on this, read [The U.S. Press and Iran](#), a carefully documented study by Mansour Farhang and William Dorman.)

None of this is a departure from the norm. The United States, as is well known, holds the world championship title in regime change and Israel is no laggard either. The most destructive of its invasions of Lebanon in 1982 was explicitly aimed at regime change, as well as at securing its hold on the occupied territories. The pretexts offered were thin indeed and collapsed at once.

That, too, is not unusual and pretty much independent of the nature of the society -- from the laments in the Declaration of Independence about the “merciless Indian savages” to Hitler’s defense of Germany from the “wild terror” of the Poles.

No serious analyst believes that Iran would ever use, or even threaten to use, a nuclear weapon if it had one, and so face instant destruction. There is, however, real concern that a nuclear weapon might fall into jihadi hands -- not thanks to Iran, but via U.S. ally Pakistan. In the journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, two leading Pakistani nuclear scientists, Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian, [write](#) that increasing fears of “militants seizing nuclear weapons or materials and unleashing nuclear terrorism [have led to]... the creation of a dedicated force of over 20,000 troops to guard nuclear facilities. There is no reason to assume, however, that this force would be immune to the problems associated with the units guarding regular military facilities,” which have frequently suffered attacks with “insider help.” In brief, the problem is real, just displaced to Iran thanks to fantasies concocted for other reasons.

Other concerns about the Iranian threat include its role as “the world’s leading supporter of terrorism,” which primarily refers to its support for Hezbollah and Hamas. Both of those movements emerged in resistance to U.S.-backed Israeli violence and aggression, which vastly exceeds anything attributed to these villains, let alone the normal practice of the hegemonic power whose [global drone assassination campaign](#) alone dominates (and helps to foster) international terrorism.

Those two villainous Iranian clients also share the crime of winning the popular vote in the only free elections in the Arab world. Hezbollah is guilty of the even more heinous crime of compelling Israel to withdraw from its occupation of southern Lebanon, which took place in violation of U.N. Security Council orders dating back decades and involved an illegal regime of terror and sometimes extreme violence. Whatever one thinks of Hezbollah, Hamas, or other beneficiaries of Iranian support, Iran hardly ranks high in support of terror worldwide.

“Fueling Instability”

Another concern, [voiced](#) at the U.N. by U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power, is the “instability that Iran fuels beyond its nuclear program.” The U.S. will continue to scrutinize this misbehavior, she declared. In that, she echoed the assurance Defense Secretary Ashton Carter [offered](#) while standing on Israel’s northern border that “we will continue to help Israel counter Iran’s

malign influence” in supporting Hezbollah, and that the U.S. reserves the right to use military force against Iran as it deems appropriate.

The way Iran “fuels instability” can be seen particularly dramatically in Iraq where, among other crimes, it alone at once came to the aid of Kurds defending themselves from the invasion of Islamic State militants, even as it is building a [\\$2.5 billion power plant](#) in the southern port city of Basra to try to bring electrical power back to the level reached before the 2003 invasion. Ambassador Power’s usage is, however, standard: Thanks to that invasion, hundreds of thousands were killed and millions of refugees generated, barbarous acts of torture were committed -- Iraqis have compared the destruction to the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century -- leaving Iraq the unhappiest country in the world according to WIN/Gallup polls. Meanwhile, sectarian conflict was ignited, tearing the region to shreds and laying the basis for the creation of the monstrosity that is ISIS. And all of that is called “stabilization.”

Only Iran’s shameful actions, however, “fuel instability.” The standard usage sometimes reaches levels that are almost surreal, as when liberal commentator James Chace, former editor of *Foreign Affairs*, [explained](#) that the U.S. sought to “destabilize a freely elected Marxist government in Chile” because “we were determined to seek stability” under the Pinochet dictatorship.

Others are outraged that Washington should negotiate at all with a “contemptible” regime like Iran’s with its horrifying human rights record and urge instead that we pursue “an American-sponsored alliance between Israel and the Sunni states.” So [writes](#) Leon Wieseltier, contributing editor to the venerable liberal journal the *Atlantic*

, who can barely conceal his visceral hatred for all things Iranian. With a straight face, this respected liberal intellectual recommends that Saudi Arabia, which makes Iran look like a virtual paradise, and Israel, with its vicious crimes in Gaza and elsewhere, should ally to teach that country good behavior. Perhaps the recommendation is not entirely unreasonable when we consider the human rights records of the regimes the U.S. has imposed and supported throughout the world.

Though the Iranian government is no doubt a threat to its own people, it regrettably breaks no records in this regard, not descending to the level of favored U.S. allies. That, however, cannot be the concern of Washington, and surely not Tel Aviv or Riyadh.

It might also be useful to recall -- surely Iranians do -- that not a day has passed since 1953 in which the U.S. was not harming Iranians. After all, as soon as they overthrew the hated U.S.-imposed regime of the Shah in 1979, Washington put its support behind Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who would, in 1980, launch a murderous assault on their country. President Reagan went so far as to deny Saddam's major crime, his chemical warfare assault on Iraq's Kurdish population, which he blamed on Iran instead. When Saddam was tried for crimes under U.S. auspices, that horrendous crime, as well as others in which the U.S. was complicit, was carefully excluded from the charges, which were restricted to one of his minor crimes, the murder of 148 Shi'ites in 1982, a footnote to his gruesome record.

Saddam was such a valued friend of Washington that he was even granted a privilege otherwise accorded only to Israel. In 1987, his forces were allowed to attack a U.S. naval vessel, the USS *Stark*, with impunity, killing 37 crewmen. (Israel had acted similarly in its 1967 attack on the USS *Liberty*.) Iran pretty much conceded defeat shortly after, when the U.S. launched Operation Praying Mantis against Iranian ships and oil platforms in Iranian territorial waters. That operation culminated when the USS

Vincennes

, under no credible threat, shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in Iranian airspace, with 290 killed -- and the subsequent granting of a

[Legion of Merit award](#)

to the commander of the

Vincennes

for “exceptionally meritorious conduct” and for maintaining a “calm and professional atmosphere” during the period when the attack on the airliner took place.

[Comments](#)

philosopher Thill Raghu, “We can only stand in awe of such display of American exceptionalism!”

After the war ended, the U.S. continued to support Saddam Hussein, Iran's primary enemy. President George H.W. Bush even invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the U.S. for advanced training in weapons production, an extremely serious threat to Iran. Sanctions against that country were intensified, including against foreign firms dealing with it, and actions were initiated to bar it from the international financial system.

In recent years the hostility has extended to sabotage, the murder of nuclear scientists (presumably by [Israel](#)), and [cyberwar](#), openly proclaimed with pride. The Pentagon regards cyberwar as an act of war, justifying a military response, as does NATO, which affirmed in September 2014 that cyber attacks may trigger the collective defense obligations of the NATO powers -- when we are the target that is, not the perpetrators.

“The Prime Rogue State”

It is only fair to add that there have been breaks in this pattern. President George W. Bush, for example, offered several significant gifts to Iran by destroying its major enemies, Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. He even placed Iran’s Iraqi enemy under its influence after the U.S. defeat, which was so severe that Washington had to abandon its officially declared goals of establishing permanent military bases (“[enduring camps](#)”) and [ensuring](#) that U.S. corporations would have privileged access to Iraq’s vast oil resources.

Do Iranian leaders intend to develop nuclear weapons today? We can decide for ourselves how credible their denials are, but that they had such intentions in the past is beyond question. After all, it was asserted openly on the highest authority and foreign journalists were informed that Iran would develop nuclear weapons “certainly, and sooner than one thinks.” The father of Iran’s nuclear energy program and former head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization was confident that the leadership’s plan “was to build a nuclear bomb.” The CIA also reported that it had “no doubt” Iran would develop nuclear weapons if neighboring countries did (as they have).

All of this was, of course, under the Shah, the “highest authority” just quoted and at a time when top U.S. officials -- Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Henry Kissinger, among others -- were urging him to proceed with his nuclear programs and pressuring universities to accommodate these efforts. Under such pressures, my own university, MIT, made a deal with the Shah to admit Iranian students to the nuclear engineering program in return for grants he offered and over the strong objections of the student body, but with comparably strong faculty support (in a meeting that older faculty will doubtless remember well).

Asked later why he supported such programs under the Shah but opposed them more recently, Kissinger responded honestly that Iran was an ally then.

Putting aside absurdities, what is the real threat of Iran that inspires such fear and fury? A natural place to turn for an answer is, again, U.S. intelligence. Recall its analysis that Iran poses no military threat, that its strategic doctrines are defensive, and that its nuclear programs (with no effort to produce bombs, as far as can be determined) are “a central part of its deterrent strategy.”

Who, then, would be concerned by an Iranian deterrent? The answer is plain: the rogue states that rampage in the region and do not want to tolerate any impediment to their reliance on aggression and violence. In the lead in this regard are the U.S. and Israel, with Saudi Arabia trying its best to join the club with its invasion of Bahrain (to support the crushing of a reform movement there) and now its murderous assault on Yemen, accelerating a growing humanitarian catastrophe in that country.

For the United States, the characterization is familiar. Fifteen years ago, the prominent political analyst Samuel Huntington, professor of the science of government at Harvard, warned in the establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* that for much of the world the U.S. was “becoming the rogue superpower... the single greatest external threat to their societies.” Shortly after, his words were [echoed](#) by Robert Jervis, the president of the American Political Science Association: “In the eyes of much of the world, in fact, the prime rogue state today is the United States.” As we have seen, global opinion supports this judgment by a substantial margin.

Furthermore, the mantle is worn with pride. That is the clear meaning of the insistence of the political class that the U.S. reserves the right to resort to force if it unilaterally determines that Iran is violating some commitment. This policy is of long standing, especially for liberal Democrats, and by no means restricted to Iran. The Clinton Doctrine, for instance, confirmed that the U.S. was entitled to resort to the “unilateral use of military power” even to ensure “uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources,” let alone alleged “security” or “humanitarian” concerns. Adherence to various versions of this doctrine has been well confirmed in practice, as need hardly be discussed among people willing to look at the facts of current history.

These are among the critical matters that should be the focus of attention in analyzing the nuclear deal at Vienna, whether it stands or is sabotaged by Congress, as it may well be.