

The Diplomats Who Would Not Learn

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The multi-front war of annihilation that the Islamic Republic of Iran and its regional proxies wage against Israel is one dimension of Tehran's war against the West. To understand the challenges Israel faces, to comprehend the impact on U.S. interests in the region and beyond, and to respond effectively, U.S. diplomats must grasp the Iran-led Islamists' convictions. This the Biden administration has failed to do.

On Oct. 4, for the first time in five years, Imam Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran, spoke at Friday prayers in Tehran. Tens of thousands of worshippers heard in person the sermons, which state TV broadcast to the nation. The imam's preaching reflected the revolutionary beliefs that inspired Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 overthrow of the Shah's regime, establishment of an Islamist theocracy, and rule until his 1989 death.

Khamenei portrayed "the usurping Zionist regime" as the inveterate enemy of not only the Palestinian, Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Egyptian, Syrian, and Yemeni nations but also of "all Islamic countries and nations." He proclaimed that Palestinian attacks on Israel, "including Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" – Iran-backed Hamas' name for the Oct. 7, 2023, massacres – "were internationally legal, logical, correct moves." And he stressed that the "entire Islamic ummah" (community of Muslim believers) must seek Israel's destruction.

Non-Muslims would benefit because "every blow to the Zionist regime by any individual or group is not only a service to the entire region but to all of humanity." That also pits America against not only Islam but all humanity since Israel – "[t]his malicious regime," in Khamenei's words – "is rootless, fallacious, and unstable, and it has only managed to stand on its feet with difficulty with U.S. support."

Iran-backed Hezbollah's aims coincide with those of Iran. In a 1985 open letter presenting its goals and principles, the "Party of God" – the literal meaning of "Hezbollah" – underscored Muslim unity in response to the United States, which "is the reason for all our catastrophes and the source of all malice." In the near term, Hezbollah envisaged Israel's "final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation."

Hamas' 1988 covenant affirms, in full agreement with Iran's Supreme Leader and Hezbollah, that Islam mandates Israel's destruction. Hamas – an acronym that means "fervor" or "zeal" in Arabic and stands for "Islamic Resistance Movement" – "strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine." It regards Zionists as "invaders." It holds that "Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes." It "believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day." And it denies that any person or authority – "[n]either a single Arab country nor all Arab

countries, neither any king or president, nor all the kings and presidents, neither any organization nor all of them, be they Palestinian or Arab” – may impair Islam’s right to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Over more than four decades, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas have solemnly stated and restated their core Islamist doctrine that America is evil, and that Israel must be wiped out. Iran and proxies’ baleful creed – and the deadly actions that implement it – appear to have made little impact on the thinking of the Biden administration diplomats. At least that’s the impression given by Atlantic staff writer Franklin Foer’s sympathetic account – “an anatomy of a failure,” he writes – of President Biden’s foreign-policy brain trust in “[The War that Would Not End.](#)”

In addition to the president, Foer’s tale of dead-end diplomacy features Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA Director William Burns, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk (U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein, who deals with Lebanon and Hezbollah, is strangely absent). Foer’s American protagonists seem to believe that they generally know better than do the Israeli government and military what is best for Israel.

The Biden diplomats also seem to have supposed that their golden tongues, refined moral sensibilities, and tactical acumen and strategic judgment could bring both sides – the jihadist perpetrators of mass atrocities and the Israelis exercising their right of self-defense – to an agreement that would end the bloodshed and return the more than 250 hostages – most Israeli civilians and including 12 Americans – seized by Hamas on Oct. 7. More than a year later, Israel continues to defend itself against Hamas in Gaza; Hamas in Judea and Samaria; Hezbollah in Lebanon; Iranian proxies in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq; and Iran, the head of the octopus. Hamas still holds in Gaza approximately 100 hostages, including seven Americans. Meanwhile, the Biden administration’s shambolic summer 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and its failure to either equip Ukraine to defeat Russia or guide Kyiv to the negotiating table do not appear to have recalibrated team members’ estimates of their discernment or resourcefulness.

Foer writes that his “reconstruction of 11 months of earnest, energetic diplomacy” is “based on interviews with two dozen participants at the highest levels of government, both in America and across the Middle East.” His retelling, though, presents the Biden administration’s perspective, reporting confidently – and to their advantage – American diplomats’ feelings and inner thoughts. In contrast, his depictions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, other senior Israeli officials, and Arab rulers appear to rely on Biden-team impressions.

Israel owes much to Joe Biden. The president's heartfelt support for the Jewish state in the immediate aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks bolstered Israeli spirits at a dark and devastating moment. The administration's swift positioning of battleships in the eastern Mediterranean served as a deterrent against a full-scale Hezbollah attack. America has sent Israel billions of dollars of special military aid. And the administration has repeatedly affirmed Israel's most fundamental right, the right of self-defense.

Nevertheless, by its own admissions the administration failed to achieve its diplomatic objectives, observes Foer. These revolved around brokering an enduring cease-fire, securing the hostages' release, restraining Israeli military operations in Gaza, promoting the establishment of a Palestinian state, and averting regional war.

U.S. diplomacy that understood better Iran's and its proxies' heinous aims and the forms of Islamic extremism to which they subscribe would have defined America's objectives differently and maneuvered otherwise than did the Biden administration. Such diplomacy would have early and regularly demanded Hamas' unconditional surrender and the hostages' release. It would have persistently and emphatically blamed Hamas for the tragic death and damage in Gaza, because the terrorists deliberately embedded their operations in and under their own civilian areas to win international sympathy by greatly increasing Palestinian noncombatant suffering. It would have reversed – indeed, it would not have undertaken – the Biden administration's sanctions relief, which bestowed on Iran tens of billions of dollars that Tehran could use to finance, equip, and train its ring of fire around Israel. (On Oct. 11, Jake Sullivan stated that in response to Iran's Oct. 1 ballistic missile attack on Israel, “the Departments of the Treasury and State have announced new and significant measures to more effectively target Iran's energy trade. The new designations today also include measures against the ‘Ghost Fleet’ that carries Iran's illicit oil to buyers around the world.”) It would have clarified to American citizens, friends and partners, and members of international organizations that Iran and its quest for regional hegemony have been and remain the principal source of Middle East instability. And it would have welcomed Israel's post-Oct. 7 change of calculations: Since Hamas could not be contained, the Jewish state must destroy the jihadists' ability to wage war and to govern.

Such diplomacy would have enabled Israel, among other things, to negotiate the hostages' release from a position of strength. Instead, the Biden administration's diplomacy too often blurred the distinction between a rights-protecting democracy's self-defense and jihadists' ambitions to survive another day to destroy it.

Foer recounts in detail a conversation in which several key Biden-team figures revealed that the war has neither enhanced their understanding nor refocused their efforts. In late August, after Hamas terrorists executed in cold blood six hostages including American Hersh Goldberg-Polin as Israeli troops approached, Biden and team took stock of the last 11

months on a secure call. Sullivan, Finer, Blinken, McGurk, and National Security Adviser to Vice President Philip Gordon joined the president to consider options declined and opportunities overlooked.

The Biden diplomats were at a loss: “Sullivan wondered if a deal had ever been possible. Hamas had just killed six of its best bargaining chips, an act of nihilism.” Their discussion made little headway. “Over the course of two hours, the group batted ideas back and forth,” writes Foer. “In the end, they threw up their hands. There was no magical act of diplomacy, no brilliant flourish of creative statecraft that they could suddenly deploy.”

In its own estimation, the Biden team had nothing to show for its efforts: “After all the trips to the region, all the suffering witnessed on those trips, all the tough conversations, all the cease-fire proposals, the conflict raged on. Three hundred thirty-one days of failure, and the single day of success was still beyond their grasp.”

So Foer’s piece ends – with the Biden team unable or unwilling to reexamine its premises, tactics, and strategic objectives. Nor does Foer learn lessons from the Biden diplomats’ failure to learn lessons from almost a year of their failed diplomacy.

A good place to begin that learning is by acquiring an understanding of crucial facts of Middle East politics that Biden diplomats suppressed, underestimated, or overlooked. For starters, U.S. diplomacy must proceed from the sobering recognition that Iran and its proxies are waging a long-declared and ruthless war to extirpate Israel and vanquish the West.

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