

## ARGUMENT

# From Rogue to Regular

What will it take for Washington to accept Iran as a “normal” state?

BY MAHSA ROUHI | FEBRUARY 4, 2019, 2:00 AM

Successive U.S. administrations have since the 1980s consistently called Iran out as a **rogue state**, bashing Tehran over its support of militant groups, its violations of human rights, and its pursuit of nuclear-related technologies. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has reinforced this position in several policy pronouncements in which he has called on Iran to be a “normal” state. But what exactly is a normal state in today’s international order?

The behaviors Iran needs to abandon to become normal in Washington’s eyes are indeed problematic. But these behaviors are commonly practiced by other nations that U.S. administrations tend to perceive as completely ordinary.

The Iranian government’s practice of hostage-taking after the 1979 revolution was the root cause of Iran’s pariah status during the Ronald Reagan years. These days, Iran’s reputation as a **rogue state** is usually linked to its regional and domestic policies—in particular, its support for nonstate actors such as Hezbollah and human rights abuses at home. However, a review of Washington’s behavior suggests that the United States would have likely overlooked many of Iran’s unsavory actions—as it did under the Shah before 1979—had Tehran not been defying the international order and challenging U.S. interests in the Middle East.

From Washington’s perspective, it seems as if a midsize power with the size and capability of Iran should either maintain an alliance with a great power or, if in pursuit of a nonalignment policy, should do so without exerting extraterritorial influence or challenging the interests of the United States and its allies. Iran, however, doesn’t fit this paradigm, as it pursues its interests in the region without paying heed to Washington’s wishes. This is perceived as an unacceptable threat and abnormal behavior by the United States, contributing to Iran’s rogue status. The double standards and hypocrisy are evident in the U.S. administration’s fixation on Iran’s actions while avoiding equally “malign behaviors” by U.S. allies.

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## **The double standards and hypocrisy are evident in the U.S. administration's fixation on Iran's actions while avoiding equally "malign behaviors" by U.S. allies.**

It's true that Iran has from the early days of the Islamic Republic been pursuing extraterritorial activities, a practice it has shared with revolutionary governments elsewhere, particularly in Latin America. In Iran's case, however, over the past four decades, partnerships with nonstate actors outside its territory have transformed into strategic assets pivotal to the survival of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's most famous and powerful proxy is Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, which is pivotal to its defense and deterrence strategy against Israel. Tehran has also established a number of loyal militias in neighboring Iraq dating back to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. These groups vary and include the Badr Organization and Kataib Hezbollah, an offshoot of the Iranian-backed elements of radical Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Through these proxies, Iran has sought to challenge U.S. interests and exert influence in Iraq and Syria.

However, support for nonstate actors and interference in other countries through proxies is by no means unique to Iran. The United States and other normal states often engage in the same practices. For instance, the United States spent **billions** on support for Afghan guerrillas in the 1980s, providing money, mules, and weapons of increasing sophistication. In the same decade, the Reagan administration and the CIA **supported** rebel factions within Nicaragua by sending **military aid** and weapons to the Contras. More recently, in Syria, the U.S. government has partnered with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, a significant nonstate actor in a region dominated by Turkey, a U.S. and NATO ally nonetheless that is vehemently opposed to Kurdish self-determination.

Russian support of nonstate actors is also common practice and part of President Vladimir Putin's current **strategy**, particularly in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, with Ukrainian **separatist** support; the same was true during the 2016 attempted coup in **Montenegro**. Washington may see Russia as a bad actor and impose targeted sanctions, but it is not treated as a rogue state or made a diplomatic pariah.

These practices are not exclusive to great powers. Middle powers such as Saudi Arabia and Israel have also engaged in support for less palatable groups for many years without

being labeled as abnormal in Washington. The Saudis famously supported anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan alongside the United States, including one Saudi citizen by the name of Osama bin Laden. The Saudis have also been **lavishly financing** actors to export its Wahhabism to both Muslim and non-Muslim nations for decades. A 2009 State Department **cable** released by WikiLeaks said, “Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba], and other terrorist groups.”

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In Syria, “normal” states such as Saudi Arabia have pursued strategies similar to those of “rogue” Iran. In an interview in 2014, then-U.S. Vice President Joe Biden **said**: “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. ... They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad—except that the people who were being supplied, [they] were al-Nusra, and al Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.” There’s also the case of Yemen. Recently criticized widely for **airstrikes that have killed thousands** of civilians **at weddings**, **at funerals**, and **on school buses**, the Saudi-led war aided by U.S.-supplied bombs and intelligence has caused the world’s **worst humanitarian crisis**, according to the United Nations.

The United States also views Israel as a normal state and a close ally. But Israel’s “Periphery Strategy” during the early years after independence **resembles** Iran’s regional strategy today. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Israel tried to force Arab states to contend with it as a regional power through alliances with non-Arab states and support for religious and ethnic minorities. This support consisted of money, training, and arms, including weapons transferred to Maronites and Shiite clans in Lebanon to fight the Palestine Liberation Organization, rebels in South Sudan, Kurds in northern Iraq, and Zaydi royalists in Yemen.

More recently, Israel has continued its support for a major Iranian **opposition** group, the People’s Mujahedin of Iran, known as MEK, that **until 2012** was also designated by the United States as a terrorist group. Israel’s support for this group is arguably intended to exert extraterritorial influence to destabilize the Iranian government and secure Israel’s

interests more broadly in the region. If such behavior is consistent with normal state behavior, then Iran's support for anti-Israel proxies is not so out of the ordinary. It is also widely believed that Israel was behind the **assassinations** that aimed to hinder the development of Iran's nuclear program.

As abhorrent as all of these behaviors are, it is clear that the support of nonstate actors, although perceived as "rogue" in the case of Iran, is tolerated as standard practice for other states, specifically those that don't challenge U.S. interests.

The U.S. government is correct that Iran has a long record of human rights violations that have repeatedly been criticized by international activists and institutions. From the early years of the revolution—with government suppression of local insurgencies, hostage-taking, and the mass execution of political prisoners including those tied to the MEK in the summer of 1988—Iran has continuously violated international human rights norms through extrajudicial actions and restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, freedom of religion, and gender equality.

But human rights violations are not unique to Iran. In fact, some of the United States' partners, Saudi Arabia in particular, are notorious for their human rights violations. The recent killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi clearly highlights that such actions do not prevent the United States from engaging and partnering with other states or perceiving them as normal. On the contrary, President Donald Trump **firmly** stood behind the U.S.-Saudi alliance, calling the kingdom its "**great ally**," despite **CIA reports** confirming the Saudi crown prince's personal direction and involvement in Khashoggi's death. And regularly, the annual Amnesty International **report** on Saudi Arabia details widespread discrimination, repressive tactics to silence activists and dissidents, torture, and arbitrary imprisonment.

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China also has an appalling record when it comes to human rights, and although it is seen as a rival in Washington, it is treated as a normal state. The United States maintains strong diplomatic and economic ties with China, a state that is widely known

to practice extensive censorship (preventing access to **virtual private networks**, **scholarly articles**, social media, and online group chats), **jail dissidents**, and **persecute minority populations**, such as the **Uighurs**.

Up until the signing of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Iran's burgeoning nuclear program was one of the main reasons cited for labeling it a rogue state. It had been hoped that the accord would lead to less external meddling and internal repression, thereby fostering the treatment of Iran as a normal state. Things did not turn out that way partly because of resistance by hard-liners within Iran but mainly because of hostility by the incoming Trump administration. But this time, the blame falls on Washington, not Tehran. This is not merely because of the unilateral nature of the U.S. withdrawal from the multiparty deal and America's demand that Tehran abandon its missile program, but more so because of the parallel U.S. consideration of the sale of dangerous nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia while turning a blind eye to the recent revelation that Riyadh may be constructing ballistic missiles of its own.

It is not the first time that the narrow window of opportunity for normalizing U.S.-Iranian relations has been shut. In the days following 9/11, Iran helped the United States fight their mutual enemy, the Taliban. Through secret back channels, the two countries initiated cooperation that lasted through the initial phase of the war. But the goodwill didn't beget goodwill, as U.S. President George H.W. Bush promised in 1989. In January 2002, his son, in his State of the Union address, named Iran as part of an "axis of evil." As Ryan Crocker, then a senior State Department official, **recalled**, "One word in one speech changed history."

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If the United States genuinely wants Iran to scale back and eventually abandon its aggressive regional policies, it must recognize that Iran will not become a normal state until it is treated like one. Washington should begin by doing away with the exceptionalism that defines "rogue" on the basis of whether it originates in Tehran.

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