



Interview with *Alex Vatanka*

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1. What is your view on the current US –Iranian relations? (What about the nuclear deal of the previous administration and the actions of the current one?)

Sure, we can make a comparison: President Obama obviously wanted a big foreign policy legacy that was different from his predecessor, George W. Bush. As a candidate, Obama said, ‘if I become president, I will reach out and talk to all our enemies or adversaries,’ and as the president, he did exactly that, but he was not exactly naive, as some people have described him. He began first by sending letters to the Iranian supreme leader quietly saying, ‘what can we do to talk?’ But because of a number of factors, nothing really moved forward then, mostly because of the Green Opposition movement in Iran in 2009. There was a moment in Tehran when they lacked the confidence to deal with this new American president, therefore nothing came of it, though that nuclear clock was still ticking. So what president Obama did, and this is my point of him not being naive, was to create a formidable international sanction regime against Iran which then hurt the Iranian economy severely, forcing the Iranians to the table, and to make that 2015 deal, and that became president Obama’s legacy - he fixed the nuclear challenge in the Middle East without going to the war with the Middle Eastern country. I think it’s also fair to say that had President Obama had more leverage, he could have pushed the Iranians outside the nuclear track, he could have said ‘your policies in the region are controversial, too many people are upset about what you are doing in places like Syria, and Iraq and so on, we can still have a debate,’ but, to be fair to him on the nuclear issue itself, he achieved what he set out to achieve, which is to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon: that much we have to give him credit for.

President Trump has come in and obviously believes that the deal that President Obama signed was a horrible one, but, unfortunately, to this day we have not heard him come up with a better alternative. And to this day, here are we speaking right in a week of the United Nations heads of state gathering in the General Assembly, president Trump does not like the deal but he has not put forward a credible alternative and that is his problem. What he is trying to say –It is not just the nuclear issue, it’s everything else about Iran. Ultimately, what President Trump is doing is questioning the nature of the Iranian regime and he has raised the issue of regime-change. When you talk about regime-change, you no longer have the partner in Tehran, because they’re obviously not in the business of self-destruction.

And I think that is the challenge for Trump - how is he going to maintain the international community's support of what President Obama gained: is he going to be able to revive the sanctions regime? I doubt it; it would require stupid acts on the part of the Iranians, and the Iranians right now are not going to do anything stupid. We have to wait and see what President Trump does. But I'll be very curious to see if he comes up with a credible alternative to what Obama achieved.

2. *What's your take regarding the U.S. leadership's view of the increasing Iranian influence in the Middle East?*

The United States is right to fear what Iran is doing in the region because, here is Iran and a regime which openly says that it wants to get the United States out of the Middle East. So, anybody in the White House would have to take that Iranian challenge seriously. There's a big country of 80 million people that says, 'I want you out of this region!' and that poses a whole number of national security risks to the US. Iran is not just some *banana republic*, it's a country with vast oil and gas reserves and an ideological commitment to Anti-Americanism that needs to be challenged. But what is the best way to do so? Destroying the Nuclear Deal is not the best way to do it, and yet, I believe the US has to go back, talk to its allies and say, 'The Iranian challenge is one of the biggest challenges facing the US in the region, you need to work with us, you need to coordinate with us closely'. This is not happening right now. What are the US allies doing instead? Beating each other over issues like who's running which television channel! Look at the Gulf States dispute. One of the first things the US needs to do is to say to its own allies, 'Look, I'm here, I don't have a military base in Qatar or Iraq or in the UAE because I forced you: you asked me to come, because, ultimately, you're all scared of the other actors.' And Iran is one of the actors they fear. It's in their interest to talk and coordinate with the United States. I hope they will do that soon.

3. *The Iraqi central government, the Assad regime and a large part of the Lebanese political spectrum are closely aligned with Tehran. Now it appears that after the coming destruction of Daesh, Iran will get a land corridor, controlled by its proxy forces, from the Iranian borders, through Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon. Do you think this will considerably alter the balance of power in the Middle East in Iran's favor?*

I think some of that has already happened; it's arguably the case when the Iranians are on the winning side in the Syrian war. We hear from the opposition-backers in Saudi Arabia and UAE almost explicitly admitting defeat in Syria, so yes, in the short term, the Iranians have won. But let me break it down a bit: people talk about the land corridor, Iran has been supporting Hezbollah since 1982 without a land corridor. Iran does not need a land corridor. Indeed, it is visually a powerful thing to put in peoples' minds that there is this "highway, that goes from Tehran to Beirut", and that would be wonderful, but the Iranians don't necessarily have the resources to build and maintain a highway running through the Syrian Sunni and Iraqi Sunni heartland. They don't necessarily want it. The Iranians, as winners of the Syrian civil war, will also be inheriting a destroyed country of 25 million people; it'll cost billions and billions of dollars to rebuild and Iran doesn't have that kind of money. If I was Iran, I would quickly reach out to others to internationalize the reconstruction of Syria. They have prevailed in the sense that Assad will remain in power, but Iran cannot "own" Syria. The demographics in Syria aren't in Iran's favor. Syria is way too big, this is not Lebanon, with a million Shia Muslims which you can simply subsidize. In other words, the side of the world wanting to see Assad out has to accept that the

Russians and the Iranians kept him afloat: he is alive and he is not going anywhere. But the other side, including the Iranians, needs to recognize that Syria is beyond their ability to reconstruct on their own, so they need to internationalize the peace part of what is about to happen there.

4. The Israelis are voicing very strong concern about the ongoing consolidation of the Iranian sphere of influence. How probable, in your opinion, is an Israel-Hezbollah war in the near future?

And if such war does happen, will it be limited to Hezbollah, or might it include other Iranian proxy armed groups which are presently operating in Syria and Iraq? Could it even involve some of Iran's own regular forces?

The Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic of Iran position on Israel is very clear. The Israelis are taking the Iranian threat seriously. Having said that, I can't see why, right now, it would be in Iran or Hezbollah's interest to open a new war with, in their eyes, the formidable enemy of Israel, which would be capable of bringing about a lot of distraction to Hezbollah's interest and Iran's interests. I think this is going to be a question of timing, and right now, with Hezbollah and Iran coming out of Syria, Hezbollah is tired; they prevailed in Syria, but lost about fifteen hundred troops, as well as a lot of credibility in the Arab world. Going after Israel by acting provocatively? That would be a serious risk to Hezbollah's ability to remain with the force it has today because the Israelis are going to hit them hard. We don't know what they'll decide in future, but imagine Hezbollah tomorrow, together with Iran, decides to mass troops on the Israeli border and say, 'we're going to come and take Jerusalem.', with that kind of positioning if its only on a symbolic level, for the domestic consumption for the Arab world, sort of giving the face of resistance? Maybe Israel will live with it. After all, Israel learnt to live with Daesh on the other side of the border. But if they take it further, if they militarize the area, as a line of confronting Israel, then Israel will have to take preventive action, which will then lead us to war. But, again, Iran and Hezbollah are both rational actors; they are not in the business of committing suicide. And Israel has obviously lived in the neighborhood of the Middle East for so long, they have always had enemies outside their borders, so what's another few hundred Hezbollah and Iranian IRGC forces? Probably something they can tolerate, as long as it's at the symbolic level. When it becomes more than that, I suspect they'll probably try and do something to stop it from happening.

5. Should both Obama and Trump administrations have done more, especially in eastern Syria, to prevent the establishment of this Iranian-controlled land link through the Syrian-Iraqi border?

It was not just what they didn't do against Iran, but also what the Russians were able to do when they moved in. Fundamentally, what we have here is a lack of strategic planning from America on the question of Syria. And to be fair, in many ways, it was the right thing for the US to do. We may sit here and romanticize the Syrian opposition and imagine these secular democrats running around. But when people started looking hard at the Syrian war, this is not what they saw: they saw a bunch of Jihadists with a very dark worldview. It's hard for any US president to support Jihadists, certainly not after 09/11, not after what happened in Afghanistan or Iraq. So, yes, the US is guilty of not having come up with a strategic plan. But at the same time, we have to accept that it was a very difficult call for the United States. And there was never really extremely sensitive, strategic issue at risk to the United States; You could argue that from a humanitarian point of view, some things should have been done differently, but –after the failure of Iraq, the ongoing fail of the Afghan Campaign - why open a whole

new topic? What the US should have done, and that might have been a game-changer early on, is to have said to its Arab allies and Turkey, which supported some of these Jihadists, 'Do not support the Jihadists!' because if the opposition in Syria had taken a different turn, had been more of a secular, free Syrian opposition type, then the world might have had much more sympathy. But as soon as the world realized the opposition was made up of Jihadists, they lost interest, and the fact that they became Jihadists with the support of the money from some US allies, and if US had put pressure on them, then maybe the Syrian opposition would have looked differently and that might have given America the right to intervene. That never happened.

6. *What is your general view on the future of the Middle East Region (ISIS, the Kurdish issue, Iran, etc)*

It obviously doesn't look good, but it's also easy to lose heart in the Middle East. One of the worst things you could do is to start categorizing these people as "inherently unable to live peacefully". You heard the phrase, "Sunnis and Shia Muslims have been killing each other for ever". At a certain point, you want to step back and say, 'Have you not read European History? How many people have been killed in the last hundred years?' What's happening now in the Middle East has a big impact because of social media, the fact that we can see all these horrible photos and videos on Facebook, which brings the graphic nature of these conflicts to us. My point is this: They are going through a horrible phase; other parts of the world have also gone through such phases in their history. But at some point, they probably will get tired of killing one another. And we already see some of that right now in Syria. We see people accepting Assad in power because they are tired of war. This is not in defense of Assad, but some kind of normality might return, a normality that doesn't necessarily need to be "good normality" but one which means less war. I think, given the circumstances right now, it might be the best thing we can hope for. Later on, we can hope for bigger moves towards democracy, liberal economics and so on. But for now, it seems like people are just interested in "ending the killings".

On the Kurdish issue: I have a lot of sympathy for the Kurds. It's a large nation of around 35 million people, about the size of Spain, both in terms of population and geography. This is not a small nation, and they have been treated badly by some of the national governments in their host countries. Some reside in Turkey and Iraq. My concern right now is the timing of the independence call. I'm not sure the timing is right, and yet I understand the urge among the Iraqi Kurds. saying –well, when is the timing right then? They've been waiting for their independence since the 1920s. I hope for an independence referendum held in a way that doesn't result in more conflict, because if Turkey and Iran decide to block the border, and if the Iraqi central government blocks the Kurdish region, then you're looking at a blockaded country. Is that really what the Kurds of Iraq want? Then again, maybe they've concluded that this is the only way, that there is no negotiated way out of this situation, and they want to take their chances and hope that the world will learn to live with it.

7. *What's your long-term view of Iranian-Turkish relations? The two powers are regional competitors, but so far have managed to keep their competition from growing into enmity. Will they manage to keep it this way in future?*

The good thing about Iran and Turkey, compared to, for example, Iran and Saudi Arabia; there are no cultural or civilizational conflicts as such. Iranians and Turks, in terms of culture, are very close. I know

people describe Turkey as a Sunni nation, Iran as a Shia nation, but it's not really in the "driver's seat". It's true that they're geopolitical competitors and have always been, but people shouldn't forget that it's only as late as 1979 and before they were military allies in one camp against the Soviet Union in the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). They need each other for economic reasons. Actually, Turkey is Iran's largest trading partner in the region. Iran has plenty of gas, Turkey has plenty of energy needs; Turkey is a transit route for Iranian goods to Europe, Iran is an attractive country for Turkish investors. When Erdogan took over, then as a Prime Minister in 2002, Iranian-Turkish relations really flourished. There were some tensions but overall things were moving smoothly. The Syrian War brought it to an end because then they became "proxy rivals". And yet, today, they have come together because they both want to prevent the independent Kurdistan in Iraq and Syria. In the long term I think we can expect tensions at times, and yet there is hope that they can see a better way in rising together, rather than being competitors. In comparison to big European powers like Germany and France, when they pursued a zero-sum game they were hurting each other. That was the whole point of the relationship. At one point they realized, 'maybe we should go further and coordinate.' This is something that the Turks and Iranians could do. And being the two big powers and non-Arab large countries, they have a lot of incentive to do so in a region that is dominated by Arabs.

8. What is your view on the prospects of Russian-Iranian relations? (in a sense that the more Trumps' administration pushes, the more Iran will lean towards Russia...)

If Trump's administration pushes the Iranians away from the West, Iran will lean towards Russia, but the big question is – What will the Europeans do? If the Europeans follow Trump's lead, the Iranians have no other way than to go towards Russia, China and so forth. If the Europeans stay, and continue the dialogue with Iran, then Iran will probably make sure it doesn't become beholden to Russia. Fundamentally, I don't think the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran has happened yet. There's a lot of tactical cooperation between the two, in Syria we see it most vividly, but fundamentally there are plenty of stereotypes between them. The Iranians voice the narrative that they don't want to become too beholden to "Mother Russia". Russia doesn't have what Iran really needs to revive its economy, and this is one of the key Iranian interests. Technological access, financial access - are not things Russia can offer. The West has it, the United States has it, but the Iranians right now are waiting to hear what Europe can offer them. Of course, they are neighbors, and the United States shouldn't get in the way of neighbors cooperating, as this alone is a reason for peace and prosperity –when countries trade and integrate. The US should stay out of trying to prevent Iran and Russia from economic-trade cooperation, but it's absolutely right for the United States to make sure that Iran and Russia don't become the big voices of anti-democratic norms on the global stage. If the "Russias," the "Chinas" and the "Irans" of this world decide to challenge the democratic norms and liberal values, it will pose a whole set of different challenges, which I think, needs to be countered.

9. And the internal political situation in Iran? (The right-wing party pressing the president and his party...)

I'll start by saying two things about it. One is that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always had inbuilt tensions within; there never has been consensus on anything inside the republic. But the other truth is that they always found a way to compromise. Ultimately, everyone within the regime, from the hardliners to the so-called reformers, knows that if the regime collapses, they are all out of a job.

Therefore, it is not in their interest to do anything to jeopardize the regime, and that is relevant to the question of where is Iran going foreign policy-wise. We do know the hardliners would rather not have Iran move closer to the West: the better option for them is to be closer to China or Russia because they aren't accustomed to the West and suspect the West wants them out of the business of running the government or having any power at all in Iran. The people around President Rohani and others believe that tying oneself to Russia and China is a romantic notion, that Russia and China are no better than the West, and it is not about who is nice to you, it's about interests. They've been arguing foreign policy-wise, that the best thing to do is to have as many eggs in different baskets as you can, so you are not beholden to China or Russia, or to the Europeans. I say that's a far more sensible approach to foreign policy. But we must also take into account that there is one unelected individual at the top of this Iranian pyramid, called Ayatollah Khamenei, who is still alive at 78, and he's the one setting the Iranian foreign policy. That said, he does respond to pressure: when Rohani goes and says, 'listen, the economy is going to fail unless you enable me to bring some foreign investments,' he gives in. Sometimes, the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) generals come and insist, 'if you don't let us take more people to Syria, Assad is going to fall', he gives in to that as well, so he is constantly running this "balancing show". What happens from the day he dies is anybody's guess. For now, the Islamic Republic of Iran has almost 40 years of proven track record despite tensions; of trying and moving gradually forward. And there is a fundamental division of power when it comes to the foreign policy: certain portfolios are in the hands of Revolutionary Guards in Iraq and Syria; they are the ones doing the fighting. When it comes to being the smiling face, attracting foreign investments or signing a Nuclear Deal, it's the Foreign Ministry, and this duality of the Iranian regime has been played enough and continues to work itself out, and so far it has been more or less a success for them.