

What's the Great Satan been up to this time?

In November 1979 the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, came up with a new name for the United States. He called it the "Great Satan". He was talking soon after the Islamic Revolution had delivered him to power, following the ousting of the previous leader, the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

What had the United States done to earn its new nickname? It had, of course, been meddling with Iran's domestic affairs.

In 1953 a US-backed coup d'état ousted the democratically-elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in favour of strengthening the power of the Shah, who was continuing two-and-a-half millennia of continuous monarchy. Why did the US want rid of Mossadegh? Why, oil, of course. Fed up of seeing Iran's oil wealth funnelled into the pockets of Great Britain, Mossadegh nationalised the oil industry. Churchill, who was British PM at the time, was far from happy about this, so he worked with Eisenhower to get rid of him.

It was hardly a secret that the Shah was a western stooge. He was known to be decadent, corrupt, and western in his tastes. He was a moderniser in some ways, continuing the socio-economic reforms instigated by Mossadegh, which helped the Iranian economy to achieve spectacular growth during the 1970s. He extended the vote to women and introduced educational reforms. However, his reign was also marked by brutality and oppression, and it was resentment towards this, coupled with his evident corruption and western allegiances, that sealed his fate. He was overthrown by a popular uprising in 1979.

Now the Ayatollah was in charge - a leader who was uninterested in pleasing the west, who was interested only in creating a theocratic Islamic state. Of course, dreadful repression and human rights abuses have ensued since. Under its current president, Hassan Rouhani, Iran remains second only to China in terms of numbers of executions carried out, apostasy is punishable by death, and every kind of torture imaginable takes place in its dungeons, much of it in-keeping with Sharia Law. Grim as this picture is, it is up to the Iranian people, Muslim leaders and the international community to pressure the Iranian leadership into enacting human rights reforms. History has demonstrated that forcing change based on western interests doesn't work.

And yet, how many times has this type of meddling occurred, in this region of the world? Look at the Iran-Iraq War. This dreadful protracted conflict started in 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran. Saddam Hussein wanted to usurp Iran's regional dominance by striking while Iran was still mired in chaos following the Islamic Revolution of the previous year. Despite Iraq being the aggressor, the United States waded in on the side of Saddam, along with the Soviet Union, France and a few other Arab countries. All were fearful of the spread of Iranian influence. The war lasted eight years and resulted in the deaths of a million Iranians and Iraqis, half of that number being civilians.

Of course, the United States went on to invade Iraq in 2003, resulting in at least another half-a-million civilian deaths, and it has declared Iran to be part of an "Axis of evil" in the wake of the 9/11 attacks - with no mention of Saudi Arabia, which was the country bearing the largest share of the responsibility for those attacks.

More recently, Obama helped to make significant progress towards controlling Iran's nuclear ambitions when he signed up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council in 2015. That progress halted when Donald Trump pulled the US out of the deal last week.

Also in the last week, the US has relocated its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, causing enormous anger among Palestinians and around the world. This move is seen as an attempt by the Trump administration to lend legitimacy to Israel's territorial claims over the city, following many decades of annexations and land seizures. On the day that Trump's daughter and son-in-law were opening the new embassy, and ingratiating themselves to Benjamin Netanyahu in the most sickening fashion, Israeli snipers were in the process of killing more than sixty Palestinians and injuring as many as three thousand during protests at the Gaza-Israeli border fence.

What to make of the decades of foreign meddling in the Middle East - much of it perpetuated by the US and its allies? Well, the least you can say is that it isn't consistent. Even *before* Trump came along that was the case. Part of the reason why the "Great Satan" tagline has endured all these years is because of the capriciousness of the world's only superpower, and those who trail along after it. With a superficial understanding at best, and a completely inaccurate picture at worst, the US and its allies have overthrown democratic regimes, backed malign regional powers, started catastrophic wars and caused lasting and unimaginable destruction in this region of the world. And with Trump in charge, US foreign policy is not likely to get any more sensible.

Having no diplomatic skills whatsoever, and no guiding ideology, Trump follows the path of least resistance where policy is concerned. A forceful and manipulative character like Benjamin Netanyahu has a word in his ear, and bang! Jerusalem is now home to the US embassy. At a stroke, he's made the pro-Israel lobby very happy, and what has it cost? More misery for the Palestinians? Well, who cares about them? They don't even have a country to call home, do they?

Iran nuclear deal? Cancel it! Or at least, pull America out. It'll make Benjamin Netanyahu happy - whose ultimate and obvious ambition is to goad the United States into war with Iran one day - and it'll please the hawks in Washington. Plus, it sticks two fingers up at Obama. Again, what's not to like?

North Korea? Little Rocket Man? Maybe we'll strike a deal. Maybe we'll wipe them off the face of the Earth.

This is foreign non-policy in the era of Trump.

If the US is ever going to shake its "Great Satan" moniker (like it even cares), it's going to have to stop using other parts of the world as playgrounds for political games and weapons testing. One of the few positives about Trump was that he vowed to concentrate on domestic US matters and give up on this idea of being a "World Policeman", laughable as that term is. Since his election, however, he has started playing dangerous games with North Korea and in the Middle East, and he has brought hawkish figures like John Bolton into his inner circle. This hardly bodes well for the future, and suggests that the words of Ayatollah Khomeini will continue to echo down the years.

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