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Outside the Wire

Iran, Israel, and the Biden Administration

Does it feel like déjà vu? It should. Remember when The Who sang, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss”? That is what it looks like seeing the slate of soon to be President-elect Biden’s cabinet appointments. It is a who’s-who of people who’ve had foreign policy roles under the Obama Administration. The most prominent of them is former Senator and Secretary of State John Kerry.

If there is one foreign policy issue that the Trump Administration and Obama Administration disagreed over most significantly, it was how they dealt with Iran. The signature foreign policy achievement of President Obama’s administration was torn apart under President Trump. Do you think this does not sting a bit with the new administration? Politicians never hold grudges, right?

With that being the case, we believe that the major foreign policy changes under the Biden administration will be putting the Iranian nuclear deal genie back in the bottle. As Biden has promised to mend alliances throughout Europe, reversing course with the Trump Administration’s tough actions on the Iran policy seems to be the logical first step. After all, the Trump Administration’s unilateral undoing of the Iran nuclear deal had been done to the objection of America’s European allies.

What will be the result?

We have already gotten a sneak preview. This past Friday, it was reported that Israeli agents carried out an assassination on Iran’s top nuclear scientist. This is also coming on the heels of what is believed to be an Israeli hit on a top Al-Qaeda leader. Both assassinations happened inside Iran. It shows the enormous capability and willingness of Israel to act in their own defense and to carry out attacks on Iranian soil.

To note, it is not the first time. It is remarkable that Israel’s Mossad (Israel’s version of the CIA) can carry out these assassinations as they did not only once, but four times between 2010 and 2012. These attacks seemed like something out of Hollywood with agents on motorcycles driving up to cars and slapping “sticky bombs” on them. Cue the Bond theme song.

What will be the implication of all this?

For now, the betting odds are that the pressure on Iran is less intense under a Biden Administration. Furthermore, this will have the effect of causing Israel to act more brazenly in their own self-interest.

The irony is that former Secretary of State John Kerry believed wholeheartedly that without a nuclear deal Israel and Iran would go to war. Thus, in trying to get back to a deal, the new administration could inadvertently push tensions between Israel and Iran higher. There is nothing like the assassination of a top scientist to kick things off.

Also, as the Wall Street Journal reported, the Israeli and Saudi meeting to discuss a normalization of diplomatic relations was shelved as Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince weighs the implications of a new presidential administration. So much of the progress that Israel has made in normalizing relations with Arab states under the Abraham Accords has been done under the common cause of opposing Iran. Saudi Arabia is one of Iran’s chief rivals. Thus, it is not surprising that the Israelis acted as they did on the heels of Saudi Arabia’s non-commitment. Again, the theme will be that Israel will not be deterred and will act unilaterally as they deem fit.

The Biden Administration has promised to build up alliances. While it will seek to do so with European nations, this will present challenges with Israel on the issue of Iran. Under the Obama administration, Israel showed a willingness to act unilaterally to preserve their self-interest. It is already broadcasting the same message to the new/old boss that will take the helm when Biden is inaugurated on January 20.

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