

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Volatility in the 2016 Middle Eastern Cauldron

Predicting what events will occur in the year 2016 is dangerous and rarely helpful. However, one thing seems certain about 2016: The Middle East will be on center stage. No matter what occurs in Asia or Europe, the world continues to be drawn to the Middle Eastern cauldron. It seems reasonable to conclude that this region will remain unstable, volatile and terribly dangerous. Events of the last few days validate this assumption. Consider these developments:

- First of all, from his perspective, President Obama considers the nuclear deal he negotiated with Iran the foreign policy hallmark of his presidency. One of his clear goals from this agreement was a more open Iran, willing to partner with the West in settling some of the region's most difficult issues (e.g., the Syrian debacle, the war in Yemen and the instability in Iraq). Is there any evidence of a change in Iran's behavior? Is there evidence that Iran seeks a more stable Middle East? Is there evidence that Iran seeks any kind of partnership with the West in stabilizing the region? The only reasonable answer to these questions is no. It is instructive that the Iranian parliament has never approved the nuclear agreement and that the Iranian president has never signed it either. In fact, it is sensible to conclude that Iran is not legally bound to anything when it comes to this agreement. Amazingly, as columnist Charles Krauthammer reports, the US State Department has declared that the deal "is not a treaty, or an executive agreement, and is not a signed document." Its success "will depend not on whether it is legally binding or signed, but rather on the extensive verification measures" and "our capacity to reimpose—and ramp up—our sanctions if Iran does not meet its commitment." The facts are that Iran remains a belligerent, aggressive and dangerous enemy. Increasingly, it seems that Iran is also as untrustworthy as it has ever been. Consider these pieces of evidence:
 1. Iran is already violating UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which bars it from testing ballistic missiles. Iran has conducted two ballistic-missile tests (with a range of 600 miles) since the nuclear deal was signed in July—one on 10 October and one on 21 November. It is rather clear that these missiles are capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Why is Iran testing these? Why are they rather blatantly violating the agreement? Initially, President Obama downplayed these missile tests, but at the end of December announced he would impose new sanctions on Iran as a result. But then the White House announced a delay on the sanctions. Why the US is engaged in such a diplomatic flip-flop is inexplicable! Iran dismissed the missile ban part of the accord as soon as it was announced. Nothing they said could infringe upon their fundamental right to build a "defensive technology." Indeed, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani

declared that more sanctions would cause him to order an acceleration of Iran's missile program.

2. In late December US Central Command acknowledged that Iranian Revolutionary Guard vessels fired several rockets in the Strait of Hormuz that landed within 1,500 yards of the US aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman. The Guard announced that the missile firing was to warn the US Navy to stay away from "a forbidden zone" in the Persian Gulf. This is a ludicrous declaration because the Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most heavily traveled international waterways and the US has every right to be there.
3. In October Iran arrested Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi, who is being held without charge in Evin Prison. Namazi is one of the World Economic Forum's "Young Global Leaders." As columnist David Ignatius demonstrates, "the Namazi case has chilled some Iranian American business leaders who had considered investing in Iran."
4. Iran recently announced the conviction of *Washington Post* reported Jason Rezaian on the ridiculous and unfounded charge of espionage. Rezaian is an Iranian-American who has been held over 500 days.

Editorially, the *Washington Post* is certainly correct in its declaration that "by flouting the UN resolutions, Iran is clearly testing the will of the United States and its allies to enforce the overall regime limiting its nuclear ambitions. If there is no serious response, it will press the boundaries in other areas—such as the inspection regime. It will take maximum advantage of Mr. Obama's fear of undoing a legacy achievement, unless and until its bluff is called."

- Second, the sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia Islam will most certainly intensify during 2016. This strife in early 2016 is centered on the growing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia is the most influential Sunni nation and Iran is without question the key Shiite nation in the Islamic world. In early 2016, Saudi Arabia announced the execution of 47 extremists, including the execution of dissident Shiite cleric Sheik Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. [Most of the others executed were Sunni extremists associated with ISIS, al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups.] The execution of Sheik Nimr exacerbated the growing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, the Iranian police stood by and watched Iranian demonstrators attack the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran. Saudi Arabia then broke diplomatic relations with Iran, pushing other Persian Gulf states to do the same. Saudi Arabia is also fighting Iranian hegemony in Yemen, where the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels are deeply entrenched and are even attacking towns across the border in Saudi Arabia. The war in Yemen is costing Saudi Arabia about \$1 billion a month. Saudi Arabia increasingly distrusts the US because of the Iranian nuclear deal and finds itself increasingly isolated in Middle Eastern affairs. A military and diplomatic inferno is engulfing the Middle East from Beirut to Damascus, from Baghdad to Sanaa, Yemen; and at the center of this

inferno are the two rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran. If this rivalry is not soon deflated, the inferno will engulf other nations in the Middle East (e.g., Jordan). When one adds to this mix the growing presence of Russia in the Syrian conflict and the increasing tension between Russia and Turkey, you have a brewing cauldron that could explode.

The year 2016 gives every evidence of being a year of immense danger and uncertainty in the Middle East. In the middle of this cauldron is peaceful, democratic, prosperous Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people. The Bible declares forthrightly that regardless of what else is occurring in the world, keep your eyes on the Middle East. As 2016 opens, that declaration seems more important than ever.

See David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (29 December 2015 and 5 January 2016); Helene Cooper and David E. Sanger, "Era of US-Iran Cooperation Remains Distant," in the *New York Times* (31 December 2015); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (17 December 2015); editorial in the *Washington Post* (20 December 2015); and editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (2-3 January 2016).