

# INTERVIEWS



## Iran, Terrorism, and ISIS. Radosław Fiedler's Interview with Bruce Hoffman<sup>1</sup>

**Bruce Hoffman** is a political analyst specializing in the study of terrorism and counterterrorism, insurgency and counterinsurgency. He is a tenured professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, where between 2010 and 2017 he was the director of the Center for Security Studies and director of the security studies program. Hoffman is the second-longest-serving director in the centre and program's three-decade history.

**Radosław Fiedler:** *In 1984 Iran was enlisted by the State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism but it did not prevent Iranian influence through its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and is supporting Bashar al Assad in Syria. Through years Iran built stronghold and is developing networks across the region. To that challenge, the US has responded through sanctions and by a drone strike and assassinating Al-Quds commander Qassam Suleimani. How should be evaluated the US counterterrorism policy to Iran? Is Washington's response to Teheran adequately and effective?*

**Bruce Hoffman:** The killing of Qassam Solemani underscored his role in organizing terrorist plots against US forces in Iraq and in shoring up Iran's dominance over that country. He organized and coordinated terrorist networks and through the Al-Quds Force, an external arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, consolidated Iran's influence in Iraq. However, he was an Iranian flag officer in that country's military and official representative of the Islamic Republic and tare long-established international law provisions against the assassination of serving military officers. It was thus a significant blow to Iran but also a debatable move in terms of international law. It may be that President Trump's deliberate unpredictability, as the assassination is meant to convey, is meant to scare Iran and thus constrain its terrorist and asymmetric activity against the US and its allies. For decades the US responded improperly to Iranian hostile acts. The hostage crisis in years 1979–81 undermined US credibility through its inability to mount an appropriate response to serial instances of Iranian-backed terrorist acts and provocation. That paralysis may have emboldened Iran to spread its malignant activity to Europe and also Argentina. One positive effect – the aftermath of the hostage crisis and failed rescue mission in 1980 was that it resulted in the creation of the US military joint Special Operations Command and serious attention thereafter was paid to building up a robust American special operations capability. I published a report for the RAND Corporation in 1991 entitled, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian-sponsored International Terrorism*. It described Iran's policy of sponsoring terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy – to be used when Iran wanted to and then put aside for some future time when it might again prove useful. That analysis from nearly thirty years ago remains completely relevant. Because of Iran's inherent conventional military weakness, it means that's country's clerical elite can rely on this

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clandestine instrument of force projection. There is always that capability at their disposal which for Iran immensely useful in eliminating dissents or deterring threats from rival or enemy powers.

*Iran and Shia militias and Hezbollah on the one hand – the other has been complicated relations between Iran and Al-Qaeda. Why Iran was a safe haven and harbour for Al-Qaeda? Which motivations were behind it?*

Teheran did not want al-Qaeda attacking Iranian territory. That is the simple explanation. It more complicated though because from one side they help to fight Al Qaeda in Syria, while concurrently providing senior Al Qaeda leaders sanctuary in Iran. The safe havens in Pakistan and Iran were central to Al-Qaeda's survival. Motivations: The enemy of my enemy is my friend type mentality. Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy make this clear in their excellent book, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight*, Bloomsbury (2017). The most evident examples were Saif al-Adl and Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah – high-ranking members of al-Qaeda who are reportedly hiding in Iran.

*Why did the ISIS spread so rapidly across Iraq and Syria? Is it possible resurgent of the caliphate?*

There were many causes for the rampant growth of Salafists and a combination of misperceptions and underestimation of the threat from ISIS mean that they initially did not face any significant resistance. The successful capture of Mosul also was caused by eroding the morale of Iraqi security forces – around 30K of them fled. Noteworthy, the ISIS's strength was a combination of successful religious favour, appeal to jihadism and expertise from former Saddamists. That was a key answer to its ruthlessness and efficiency. Additionally, the enthusiasm of younger people who were provided a new platform for recruitment with attractive propaganda through social media. This threat will not fade away. Now Iraqis highly stressed economically and politically, torn with divergent interests and sectarian divisions with Iranian rising influence in these circumstances ISIS's remnants will thus continue terrorist activity in Iraq.

*Almost twenty years ago was 9/11 – how since that time has changed terrorism? In 2011 and 2019 – leaders of Al Qaeda and ISIS were eliminated. Is the targeted killing an effective response to undermine terrorism?*

Since 2001 terrorism has changed a lot. Now we are facing many more networks, cells, and existing different groups. Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Iranian proxy groups – terrorism has spread across many regions and resulted in the emergence of the highly consequential and challenging lone wolf phenomenon. Terrorism poses an even greater threat today Terrorists are using different channels and social media, communicators for orchestrating their activity. The lone wolf is difficult to trace since the perpetrators are acting without structures and networks.

Targeted killing is a useful tactic but only a tactic that is part of a broader counterterrorism strategy. In the case of Baghdadi and bin Ladin, they were brought to justice and their

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deaths destroyed the sense of invincibility claimed respectively by ISIS and al Qaeda. But we need to be more realistic about our counterterrorism accomplishments – in that, leader elimination did not abolish or even seriously diminish or undermine these groups' activity. In some cases, a new commander might be worse than his predecessor.

Radosław FIEDLER  
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### **Sanctions, Accommodation, and Defiance. A Long Track of US Sanctions Targeted at Iran. Radoslaw Fiedler's Interview with Richard Nephew**

**Richard Nephew** is a Senior Research Scholar at the Center on Global Energy Policy. He is the author of *The Art of Sanctions*, a book from CGEP's Columbia University Press book series. Richard joined the Center on February 1, 2015, directly from his role as Principal Deputy Coordinator for Sanctions Policy at the Department of State, a position he held since February 2013. R. Nephew also served as the lead sanctions expert for the U.S. team negotiating with Iran. From May 2011 to January 2013 Nephew served as the Director for Iran on the National Security Staff where he was responsible for managing a period of intense expansion of U.S. sanctions on Iran. Earlier in his career, he served in the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation at the State Department and in the Office of Nonproliferation and International Security at the Department of Energy. Nephew holds a Masters in Security Policy Studies and a Bachelors in International Affairs, both from The George Washington University.

**Radoslaw Fiedler:** *There is a long record of sanctions enacted against Iran in the 80s–90s. The sanction path was initiated by Carter's administration and that policy was continued in the following decade. Why all those instruments of economic and financial pressures did not change Iranian demeanour and its "malign" policy?*

**Richard Nephew:** In some cases, sanctions did change Iranian policy. One notable example, President Carter's sanctions achieved their goal-Iran accepted the Algiers Accords and released the hostages. The agreement was done within the scheme to relieve the assets for the exchange of people.

Most of the sanctions have been enacted unilaterally since 1981. Most of the sanctions were not harmful to Iran for the mere reason that there are almost no business ties between both countries. The situation changed a decade later when the United States began to use secondary sanctions, which had an impact on European business in particular and Europeans got nervous. To reduce transatlantic tensions between the European Union and the United States, European partners and Clinton's administration initiated negotiations which resulted in an agreement that some European business would continue in exchange for European cooperation on other Iran issues.

Until the UNSC resolutions in 2006, the United States was unable to get Europe and other partners to join a multilateral sanctions effort voluntarily; after 2006, the United States used its own economy to create leverage with those partners to cooperate on sanctions.

*Why did Iran make concessions in its nuclear program and finally accepted provisions of the nuclear deal called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)? Why did in that case sanctions work?*

The period before the JCPOA I categorize as coercive multilateralism in sanctions policy toward Iran. It is a fact that EU sanctions pressure but also Japanese, Canadian, Russian,

or Chinese pressure mattered and it became truly a global effort. But, a lot of this came from the threat of U.S. pressure.

Despite some misunderstandings, a common ground for cooperation was founded which brought the nuclear deal (JCPOA). Before and after negotiations, JCPOA critics raised concerns about excluding from the deal issues related to Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its regional activity. Some of the ardent critics claimed that negotiations should lead to the release of foreigners from Iranian prisons. It was a high-risk formula “centrifuges for the people.” It was not a good idea to trade nuclear issues in exchange for ceasing terrorism or releasing imprisoned people. It only encouraged Iran for continuing its malign activity as a trading instrument for nuclear negotiations. The JCPOA was the first step, tensions needed time and other issues might be discussed in the following steps. Unfortunately, we did only one step and the other options were never tested.

*Considering the JCPOA formal status – would it be better protection for the deal if it received a status of a treaty instead of an intergovernmental agreement? As we know President Donald Trump easily withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.*

Ratification was beyond the question because the bipartisan approval was not possible at that time. Three major issues were holding back the treaty solution: firstly, political divisions and opposition to President Obama – GOP had a 2/3 majority over Democrats in the Senate and they were vehement JCOPA critics and Obama personally. Secondly, Congress had difficulties to approve treaties. A striking example – it did not approve even protections for the disabled guaranteed in the UN conventions. New Start was a rare exception. Thirdly, treaties can also be easily withdrawn – as, George W. Bush did with the ABM.

*US withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions and conditioned lifting them on Iran’s acceptance of Pompeo’s 12-steps plan. Is that policy realistic? Would Iran bow to the demands under the US pressure and would its results be achieved better than within the JCPOA deal?*

Trump and Pompeo say that they are simply trying to reach a better deal after enacting more sanctions and making unprecedented pressure. Many experts are sceptical that Iran would surrender, which would be the equivalent of what the U.S. has demanded.

For this reason, many believe the current US administration desires to bring to the collapse of the Iranian regime – it is a rather unrealistic scenario. More probable is a direct military clash between the US and Iran. The concept of maximum pressure provoked maximum resistance in Iran. Imposing sanctions after sanctions which in many aspects are abusive is delinked from the political realistic goals. One of the effects of the maximum pressure by now has been strengthening of hardliners in Iranian internal politics and much more Iranian defiance for future JCPOA renegotiations with the new US administration. Iran under pressure is trying to adapt but with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is pretty hard. Formally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the humanitarian corridor to Iran might be opened regardless of sanctions. In reality, due to sanctions costs of a business are rising and Iran is almost excluded from international business and trade. For Iranians with almost non-existent commercial and financial ties with the outside world, it is difficult to import spare parts for medical equipment, ventilators, and protective gear.

*Why has the European Union done too little in building a protective mechanism from the maximum pressure sanctions devastating effects on the Iranian economy and seemed unable to protect trade and financial relations between Iran and the EU?*

In 2016 the EU needed to do more to sustain the JCPOA – it kind of ignored Trump's hostile declarations against the deal. The EU wanted to let nature take its course with respect to business with Iran, but this became impossible after Trump was elected. The EU started planning the Instex financial mechanism six months after the US withdrew in May 2018 and so what was done eventually was much too late.

Now all sides, including Iran are waiting for a result of US presidential elections in November. With new Democratic administration – probably it would be an opportunity for renewing JCPOA, although it would be a very hard task, also due to expiring deadlines and Iran's more troublesome cooperation with the IAEA. In the case of the second Trump's term, a few options are possible: negotiations and de-escalation but also rising tensions and risks of conflicts.

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