

The Iranian Hedgehog vs the American Fox

The escalation between the two countries is being driven by the clashing temperaments of their leaders

By Karim Sadjadpour

Abstract

For Washington and Tehran to reach a deal — or at least avert a conflict — the Iranian supreme leader and the US president will have to assume different temperaments. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will have to acquire the flexibility of a fox, while US President Donald Trump will have to adopt the strategic patience and resolve of a hedgehog.

Though few citizens of the United States or Iran seek conflict, the two countries are on a dangerous trajectory that has less and less to do with the diverging interests of the two nation-states. Instead, more and more, the escalation is being driven by the [clashing temperaments](#) of two cynical elderly men. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the 80-year-old Iranian supreme leader, has been steadfast, even monomaniacal, in opposing the US. In contrast, the 73-year-old US President Donald Trump has employed a flurry of strategies — from flattering Iran to coming within minutes of military strikes — to bring Tehran to heel.

The Oxford University philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin's [seminal 1953 essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox"](#) offers a simple dichotomy to explain recent dynamics between the US and Iran — or, rather, between Mr Trump and Mr Khamenei.

Borrowing a line from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, Sir Berlin divided human beings into two different categories: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Hedgehogs have a grand theory of the world, while foxes employ a different cunning for every circumstance. He cited Shakespeare and Aristotle as examples of foxes, while "Karl Marx was the most implacable hedgehog of them all".

Among world leaders today, few hedgehogs are more implacable than Mr Khamenei. Hedgehogs, Sir Berlin argued, "relate everything to a single central vision ... a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance." In this spirit, Mr Khamenei's organising principle throughout his 30-year rule as supreme leader has been "resistance" against America.

Rather than calming Iranian national anxieties about the prospect of war with the US, Mr Khamenei used the word "resistance" more than 65 times in a recent [speech](#) — sometimes more than once in a sentence. He said, "Today in our region, the common word among nations is resistance. Everyone agrees with resistance ... The recent defeats that the Americans suffered in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and other such countries were an outcome of the resistance of Resistance groups."

For the supreme leader, "[resistance](#)" against "global arrogance" — his moniker for American imperialism — is both an ideology and a strategic doctrine. "Resistance, unlike surrender, leads to the retreat of the enemy. When the enemy bullies you, if you take a step back, he will

undoubtedly advance. The way to stop him from advancing is to resist,” he said. Consistent with Mr Khamenei’s philosophy, Iran has not responded to Mr Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign with concessions, but rather by sowing chaos in the region and threatening to restart its nuclear programme.

Contrasting the dogmatism of hedgehogs with foxes, Sir Berlin wrote: The latter “pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.” Even sympathetic observers of Mr Trump’s presidency would likely concur that he pursues contradictory ends motivated by an unknown psychological cause for no clear moral principle. But while Mr Khamenei is the quintessential hedgehog, Mr Trump is a variation on the prototypical fox; he does not know many things as much as he says many things.

Unlike the supreme leader’s sole strategic doctrine, Mr Trump’s Iran strategy — sometimes to the left of American journalist Glenn Greenwald, and sometimes to the right of American talk show host and political commentator Sean Hannity — has had the coherence of a Jackson Pollock painting. Days after angrily [tweeting](#) “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran”, Mr Trump [proclaimed](#): Iran “has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership.” After Iran shot down a US drone over the Gulf in June, Mr Trump ominously tweeted: “[big mistake](#)”. Moments later, he [assessed](#) it may have just been a big misunderstanding. Hours later, he [claimed](#) to call off military strikes against Iran 10 minutes before they were to happen.

Mr Trump’s erratic approach — provoking an escalation cycle while simultaneously making clear his aversion to conflict — only increased Tehran’s appetite for risk. As Dr Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of Foreign Policy from the Brookings Institution, has [pointed](#) out, Mr Trump is learning the same hard lesson as six US presidents before him. If Tehran is willing to subject its population to economic hardship and use the entirety of its energy wealth to promulgate an antiquated ideology that advocates “Death to America” rather than “Prosperity for Iranians”, the US’s has limited ability — using either engagement or coercion — to dissuade it.

Indeed, despite the imbalance of power between Tehran and Washington, Mr Khamenei has been the one to consistently refuse Mr Trump’s offer of dialogue, not vice versa. While many have declared this a failure of Mr Trump’s [maximum pressure](#) campaign, the reality is that Iran is in a much greater [bind](#). A US military strike on Iran might have been averted for now, but Iran’s deteriorating economic circumstances cannot likely be reversed absent an accommodation of the US.

In this context, for Mr Trump, the best option is not to respond militarily to Iranian acts of aggression and sabotage, but to use them to build more robust international support, all while keeping the door of diplomacy open. While the deteriorating Iranian economy probably would not make the regime implode, Iranian popular pressure will grow on Mr Khamenei to justify his opposition to negotiations, and will increasingly expose him as the obstacle that stands between Iranians and a better future. Tehran already shows signs of frustration with Mr Khamenei’s intransigence, including President Hassan Rouhani’s recent [admission](#) that he has no authority over Iran’s foreign affairs.

When and if Tehran is ready to talk, the differences between Mr Trump and Mr Khamenei present further obstacles. Mr Trump prefers public pageants about broad topics; Mr Khamenei prefers private discussions about narrow topics. Reaching a deal — or at least averting a conflict — will require Mr Khamenei to acquire the flexibility of a fox, and Mr Trump to adopt the strategic patience and resolve of a hedgehog. While two men with a combined age of 153 surely lack the psychological and ideological agility to change who they are, the possibility of a devastating war will encourage a little more deftness.

About the Author

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