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A Longview on Iran: Echoes from the Ancient Middle East

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The Activist History Review



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A Longview on Iran: Echoes from the Ancient Middle East



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COMMENTS 0

By Jason Schlude

Will the Trump administration go to war with Iran? The chances are ever increasing. In 2018, President Trump [removed](#) the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal of 2015 and again imposed U.S. sanctions on the state. In April 2019, his administration newly [classified](#) Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp—an elite branch of the Iranian state military- as a foreign terrorist organization. Then the Trump administration [announced](#) the end of waivers for major countries importing Iranian oil. As of May, they, too, could be subject to sanctions. Next, White House officials [announced](#) that they would send an aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf in response to intelligence reports that Iran or Iranian-backed militias are planning attacks on U.S. troops and interests in Iraq and Syria. Reports [suggested](#) that Iran was moving short-range ballistic missiles onto boats in

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the Persian Gulf. Most recently, the U.S. sent a group of B-52 bombers to Qatar and [announced](#) the deployment of a Patriot missile-defense system to the Persian Gulf as well. There have been rumors of the U.S. deployment of ground troops, too, but President Trump recently [denied](#) that report. Still, little suggests the confrontation will end here.

While these decisions maximize pressure on Iran, they also have advantages for it. Iran aspires to be the acknowledged leader of the Muslim world. To achieve that status, it consistently resists what the Muslim world sees as aggression in the Middle East by the U.S., especially in its decisions related to Israel. This is how Iran hopes to overcome Sunni-Shia religious divisions. In 2018, President Trump [executed](#) a plan to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thereby recognizing it as capital of the state of Israel. Iran's Speaker of Parliament Larijani [called](#) him "feeble-minded" for the move. When President Trump [recognized](#) Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, Iran's President Rouhani stated that it is "trampling on international regulations about the Golan." Its Foreign Minister Zarif warned the Arab and Muslim world that the U.S. and Israel "will steal your lands." With its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps blacklisted, Iran [responded](#) in kind, classifying United States Central Command as a terrorist organization. In the midst of a buildup of U.S. military in the Gulf, President Rouhani [indicated](#) Iran's willingness to return to its previous program to develop nuclear arms.



Image 1: Coin of Orodus II, r. 57-38 BCE, Wikimedia Commons.

Where will this lead? Ancient history provides an illuminating—if unsettling—perspective. In 40 BCE, the ancient Iranian empire of the Parthians decided to invade ancient Syria and its environs, which at that time were part of the Roman Empire. The Parthians were a northern Iranian people, known for their fierce cavalry

and flexible political structure, which relied upon the loyalty and arms of local leaders and subject territories. Since c. 250 BCE, they expanded their control until they commanded an impressive empire in the Middle East, stretching from modern Afghanistan to the Euphrates River. In 40 BCE, however, their king Orodes II decided to make a bid for a bigger empire still. Several ancient authors recount the attempt, including Cassius Dio, a Greek writer of the 3rd century CE (48.24-27, 48.39-41, 49.19-23) and Josephus Flavius, a Jewish writer of the 1st century CE (*Jewish War* 1.248-357; *Jewish Antiquities* 14.330-491). According to them, Orodes sent a Parthian force into Syria under the leadership of his son Pacorus, which quickly [conquered](#) a vast area that would now include modern Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and part of Turkey. Along the way, they installed sympathetic rulers in key positions, such as the vassal king Antigonos in Judaea. From the 90s BCE through the 220s CE, the Parthians were engaged in a rivalry with the Roman Empire for power in the Middle East—and in 40 BCE, with their patience at its end, they tried to oust Rome from the region. In the end, the conquest proved temporary. Rome responded aggressively and effectively. Advised by Mark Antony and Octavian (later known as Augustus), the Roman senate [appointed](#) Herod (the Great) as Rome's client-king in Judaea, and together Mark Antony (and his stellar general Ventidius) and Herod reconquered the lost territory.

This episode of conflict is instructive. Many have explained it as rooted in Rome and Parthia's incompatibility, but the picture needs adjustment. This Parthian invasion is best explained by Roman disregard for diplomatic agreements, imperial aggression, and ultimate unwillingness to compromise with Parthia. In 54 BCE, the Roman general Crassus decided to violate an earlier Roman-Parthian agreement (probably established in 63 BCE) that the Euphrates River would be the border of their empires. This was a significant divergence from previous Roman policy. Crassus wished to initiate a war with Parthia to heighten his profile back in Rome. But the result was not what he expected. The Parthians brutally defeated him at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE, their mounted bowmen laying Rome's legions low. Crassus, too, was killed in the disaster. The Parthians [responded](#) in the late 50s BCE by briefly raiding a city precious to Rome: Antioch (see Dio 40.28-29). They



Image 2: Head of Crassus, c. 115-53 BCE, Wikimedia Commons.

wished to show Rome that its interests in the Middle East also were vulnerable. Their point made, they avoided further conflict—even when the Romans were tied up in their own civil war, with Julius Caesar and his supporters fighting Pompey and his partisans. Along the way, Caesar planned a retaliatory invasion of the Parthian Empire (cut short by his assassination in 44 BCE). This led the Parthians to seek out alternative Roman partners, interested in a constructive Roman-Parthian relationship (even if for self-serving reasons). These partners included Cassius and Brutus, the infamous assassins of Caesar. Yet the Parthian efforts failed. These partners were defeated by the inheritors of Caesar’s cause, Mark Antony and Octavian/Augustus, who the Parthians assumed would attack them. Only with their options for compromise and peace exhausted, did the Parthians attempt to oust Rome violently from the region.



Image 3: Presidents Rouhani and Trump, from BBC.

The Trump administration’s current course is dangerous and undesirable. We should maintain a healthy skepticism of the motives and tactics of Iran, but continued unwillingness to compromise with and deliberate provocation of it may lead to an uncontrolled conflict. Breaking agreements with Iran (when [evidence](#) suggests it was abiding by its terms), antagonizing its allies (when unnecessary), and attempting to painfully corner it (while forcing others to join in) can lead to its desperation. This can go in two directions: Iranian willingness to make concessions or intensified bellicosity and demonstrations of power. When other options exist for progress in the Middle East, why take the gamble? With the U.S. increasing its military presence in the Persian Gulf, the question is more burning than ever. Unlike the Parthians, modern Iran and its allies need not resort to thundering horses to reach their targets. Iran has significant weapons capability, including a ballistic missile

program, and potentially willing proxy forces in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. A strike on U.S. or Israeli targets, whether military or civilian, could take unnecessary lives and produce a counterproductive U.S. military intervention. Such an intervention could expose U.S. forces to avoidable risk, entangle us in another conflict in the Middle East, and strengthen ideological opposition to the U.S. The last major U.S. intervention in Iran, the U.S.-backed [overthrow](#) of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, permanently damaged its reputation in Iran and the Middle East. The safest course is to diffuse the impending military crisis and return to diplomacy as a reliable and realistic negotiation partner. That, too, will have its challenges. Successful diplomacy is built on compromise—an increasingly rare commodity in the political landscape.



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