



## REGIONAL PUSHBACK, NUCLEAR ROLLBACK

### A Comprehensive Strategy for an Iran in Turmoil

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ON OCTOBER 13, 2017, President Donald Trump rolled out a new U.S. strategy toward Iran focused on countering its “destabilizing” regional activities, its “support for terrorist proxies,” its “proliferation of missiles,” and on fixing “serious flaws” in the July 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>1</sup> The president, however, was largely silent about the specific steps he intended to take to achieve these goals, how the various parts of the strategy fit together, and how to prioritize and phase these various elements. By all appearances, major elements of the strategy remain to be fleshed out. The outbreak of widespread popular unrest in Iran in late December adds a further layer of complexity to the mix, but creates opportunities for the United States as well.



This task of formulating a comprehensive Iran strategy takes on special urgency with Iran's dramatic transformation in the past decade from a country fearing encirclement to a country implementing a strategy of encirclement vis-à-vis America's foremost regional allies—Israel and Saudi Arabia; from a strategically lonely power to the leader of the region's most cohesive political-military bloc—the so-called Axis of Resistance; and from a nuclear rogue state to a nuclear threshold state, whose status as such has been confirmed and legitimized by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>2</sup>

This reversal of fortunes threatens to upend the regional balance. It may encourage Tehran to believe that it can eventually coerce or defeat U.S. regional allies through intimidation, subversion, or protracted proxy wars of attrition—and make good on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's prediction that Israel will no longer exist in twenty-five years.<sup>3</sup> Tehran may hope that these defeats for America's local allies will undermine U.S. influence in the Middle East, and enable Iran to become the region's dominant power. This shift in the balance has already sparked a low-level regional proxy struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It threatens to trigger yet another war between Israel and Hezbollah—and the latter's allies in the "Axis of Resistance." And it may spur a new jihadist mobilization against Iran's expanded regional presence. Even if a crisis or war is averted now, the lifting of the ban on arms transfers to Iran in 2020 and the progressive removal of constraints from Tehran's nuclear program after 2025 could spark another nuclear crisis with Iran at that time. Efforts to avert such eventualities must start now.<sup>4</sup>

It is too soon to know whether the most recent bout of unrest in Iran will create opportunities to reverse this trend and forestall such developments. If protests lose steam or are quashed, the possibility of a recurrence could alter the regime's spending priorities and risk calculus for years to come. If protests continue, it is anyone's guess what may then happen. At the very least, they are a source of vulnerability: the protests could cause an economic slowdown and further discourage foreign investment in Iran; the use of force by the regime could further isolate it, and could cause more Iranians to join the ranks of the protestors; and continued unrest could force the regime to divert more of its attention and resources to internal security matters, affecting future military force-building decisions.

The administration's strategy will face formidable challenges. Foremost is an emboldened Iran, buoyed by its victory over Syrian rebel forces—with Russian help and U.S. acquiescence—which greatly limits U.S. options in the Levant. Moreover, some of America's European allies see the Islamic Republic as a potential partner in managing the Middle East's problems, rather than a source of instability. Russia is allied with Iran in Syria,<sup>5</sup> while China sees Iran as central to its One Belt One Road development strategy.<sup>6</sup> And heightened tensions with North Korea, Russia, and China now make competing claims on the attention of U.S. policymakers and on U.S. military resources. The ways, means, and ends of U.S. strategy toward Iran and America's long-term strategic competition with the Islamic Republic must be tempered by and reflect those realities.

For its strategy to be sustainable, Washington should avoid large, open-ended military commitments. The United States should strive to keep its competition with Iran below the threshold of armed conflict; U.S. domestic opinion won't support another Middle East war, the United States is liable to be blamed—even by erstwhile allies—for any crisis or war, and long-term strategic competitions of this sort aren't decided by a single knockout blow. Rather, Washington should seek incremental gains that will have a significant cumulative impact on Tehran over the long term. Such an approach is also less likely to lead to a conflict with Iran that could jeopardize the JCPOA. And Washington should do its part to keep open communication channels with Tehran to manage tensions and influence Iranian behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the current situation also presents opportunities. Iran is trying to build an empire on the cheap, and it off-loads risks and costs on its proxies and partners. It is therefore vulnerable to cost-imposing strategies that present it with multiple dilemmas—especially if continuing unrest at home forces the regime to devote additional resources to internal security. Moreover, much of Iran's "arc of influence" in the Levant passes through Sunni-Arab-majority regions, which are unlikely to welcome a long-term presence by Iranian and Shia proxy forces.

To seize this opportunity, Washington should abandon its default commitment to regional stability. Rather, it should seek stability when that serves U.S. interests, and exploit instability when playing the role of spoiler may harm its adversaries. In doing so, the United States will be turning the tables on adversaries like Iran and

Russia that have often used this tactic against it. Washington should likewise counter Tehran's proxy strategy with a U.S. proxy strategy. To this end, the United States should thwart the consolidation of Iran's new regional order by imposing costs. Wherever possible, Washington should tie down Iranian and proxy forces in low-level, open-ended conflicts that could limit their ability to engage in troublemaking elsewhere. This includes quietly encouraging domestic unrest in Iran to divert resources that might otherwise be spent on capabilities to engage in troublemaking abroad.

The administration's rollout of its Iran strategy needlessly complicated implementation by front-loading efforts to fix the JCPOA, while not offering much in the way of a strategy for countering Iran's regional activities, or explaining how these two branches of the strategy are linked. The administration gave Congress sixty days to work with U.S. allies to pass legislation that would fix the nuclear deal. This deadline passed without Congress taking action, and it is not clear what kind of legislation may be possible given America's polarized politics and widespread distrust abroad of the president's intentions.<sup>8</sup> Absent a fully formed strategy, the executive branch and Congress are likely to continue to slap additional, largely symbolic nonnuclear sanctions on Iran<sup>9</sup> while formulating a long-term comprehensive approach.

Such a comprehensive strategy should front-load efforts to counter Iran's regional activities; with each passing day, Iran is reshaping the region's geopolitics<sup>10</sup> and creating conditions that in the long run may increase the prospects of a regional war.<sup>11</sup> Countering these efforts is therefore a matter of utmost urgency. Moreover, cooperation with U.S. allies on Iran's destabilizing activities might pave the way for cooperation on efforts to strengthen the nuclear deal. At any rate, it will take time to develop a common approach for bolstering the JCPOA—perhaps a year, perhaps more—whether in the form of a supplemental agreement with Iran, efforts to dissuade Iran from building an industrial-scale nuclear infrastructure after 2025, or activities to deter Iran from attempting a nuclear breakout. Finally, the United States should work, whenever possible, with its European allies to constrain Tehran's ability to act against protestors by focusing attention on its human rights abuses. In this way, the protests can continue while the regime will be forced to devote additional resources to the problem.

## Countering Iran's Regional Influence

Iran has learned in the past three decades that it can undermine American interests without risking a military confrontation by waging proxy warfare and operating below the U.S. response threshold.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, as well the growing perception in recent years that Washington is neither reliable nor competent, the United States faces a credibility gap. Allies no longer trust the United States, and enemies no longer fear it. So restoring U.S. credibility and a perception of competence is job number one for the Trump administration. The United States must show—by word and deed—that it will no longer ignore provocations that it accepted in the past (e.g., harassment of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf) and that it is more risk acceptant in its dealings with Iran than in the past.<sup>13</sup> The intent should be to induce caution in an increasingly assertive yet still fundamentally risk-averse Iran, in order to contain its regional influence.<sup>14</sup> This will not only reduce the prospects of a regional conflict involving Iran, but could cause Iran to act with greater caution in the nuclear realm, when constraints on its nuclear program are progressively lifted after 2025.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Beyond steps to restore American credibility, U.S. efforts to counter Iran's growing regional influence through a policy of "pushback" should be guided by a number of principles, as outlined in the following paragraphs.

**PREVENT VACUUMS.** Many of Iran's gains in recent years have been the result of its opportunistic filling of vacuums created by the United States.<sup>15</sup> When the United States has stepped back, Iran has often stepped forward.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Washington must remain engaged in the region. It should shore up stable allies there to prevent the emergence of ungoverned spaces. And it should avoid the creation of vacuums that Iran can exploit by working with local nonstate actors to hold ground, and creating sustainable political arrangements in ungoverned spaces.

**ADDRESS SHIA GRIEVANCES.** Tehran has often taken advantage of the grievances of beleaguered Shia communities and the repressive and sectarian policies of some U.S. Sunni Arab partners to create proxy forces

that may engage in subversion and terrorism at Iran's behest. America's Sunni Arab partners can deny Iran such opportunities by adopting more-inclusive politics,<sup>17</sup> as it is easier to prevent the creation of Iranian proxies than to deal with them thereafter.<sup>18</sup> However, this will require far-reaching changes in the zero-sum, winner-take-all political culture of many U.S. allies and partners in the region.

**TARNISH THE RESISTANCE "BRAND."** Nothing succeeds like success. Just as the Afghan mujahedin's victory over the Soviets inspired a generation of Sunni jihadists, the victories of Iran's proxies are energizing a generation of Shia jihadists, and aiding Iran's efforts to create a transnational Shia jihadist network—consisting of fighters from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—under its control. The "resistance" brand has appeal because its adherents believe it embodies a formula for success used by Iranian proxies and partners to expel Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, and to defeat an alleged "U.S.-Saudi-Zionist" conspiracy to unseat Bashar al-Assad in Syria since 2011. Defeat, however, will tarnish this brand. If "resistance" can no longer yield glorious victories, Iran may find it more difficult to recruit new proxies and may be less willing to take risks. Thus, undermining Iran's military achievements—through economic sanctions, information operations, and the use of proxies to bleed pro-Iran forces—needs to be part of any attempted U.S. pushback.

**DEFLECT RISKS AND COSTS BACK ONTO IRAN.** Iran tries to off-load the risks and costs of its anti-status quo regional policies onto others. Thus, it prefers to fight to the last non-Iranian Shia proxy, and to use the resources of others to subsidize these groups. For instance, the Iraqi government funds the more than 100,000 fighters of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), whose senior leadership and most capable units respond to Tehran's orders.<sup>19</sup> Iran even arms and supports Sunni cobelligerent groups when it is in its interest to do so.<sup>20</sup> This enables Iran to carry out an imperial policy on the cheap. The United States and its partners should try to deflect risks and costs back onto Iran by arming and supporting groups opposed to Iranian influence, by enacting sanctions that penalize those who subsidize Iranian regional activities, and by engaging in information operations that highlight Tehran's modus

operandi and show Iranians, including members of President Hassan Rouhani's camp, the costs they pay for the regime's far-flung military commitments—all to further erode domestic support for these activities.<sup>21</sup>

**DECONSTRUCT THE "AXIS OF RESISTANCE."** Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran are the core members of the "Axis of Resistance" and have generally acted with unity of purpose in pursuit of their vital interests. Peripheral members of the axis such as the Houthis of Yemen, however, have greater autonomy, and occasional members such as Iraq, Hamas, and Sudan have moved in and out of Iran's orbit in accordance with their own interests and regional power dynamics. The United States and its Arab allies should seek to keep Sudan out of Iran's orbit and avoid pushing Iraq, the Houthis, and Hamas further into its arms.

**SEVER LINES OF COMMUNICATION.** Iran has developed redundant air, land, and sea lines of communication<sup>22</sup> to arm and reinforce its network of proxies and partners, and build an arc of influence spanning the region. Interdiction operations can disrupt and slow the development of this network,<sup>23</sup> and regional distribution hubs can be shut down—as occurred when Sudan yielded to Saudi pressure to break its ties with Iran in 2016.<sup>24</sup> To counter these interdiction operations, Iran is reportedly building arms factories in Lebanon (for Hezbollah), Syria, and Yemen (for the Houthis).<sup>25</sup> If completed, these factories will greatly diminish the efficacy of interdiction operations, and enhance the capabilities of these Iranian partners. The United States should therefore support efforts by its allies to destroy these facilities.

**DENY EXTERNAL BASES OF SUPPORT.** Iran has tried to create external bases of support for its policies among Shia populations in the region and beyond.<sup>26</sup> It funds mosques and cultural centers around the world to engage in missionary and educational activities, and to provide cover for Iranian intelligence operatives.<sup>27</sup> It likewise provides scholarships for foreign Shia to attend religious seminaries in Iran, where they are exposed to its brand of radical Islam in the hope that they will identify with Iran and work on its behalf when they return home. Some are recruited to serve as agents of its intelligence services.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, the United States should press countries around the world to expel

Iranian intelligence personnel who operate under the cover provided by religious and cultural institutions, and discourage their citizens from studying in Iran.

**PREVENT ECONOMIC DEPENDENCIES.** Iran tries to foster economic dependencies in vulnerable neighbors for financial gain and political leverage. It dumps cheap, subsidized food products and consumer goods in Iraq and Afghanistan to undercut their agricultural and light industry and favors its allies in these countries when awarding business contracts.<sup>29</sup> Iran's damming and diversion of rivers has undermined Iraqi agriculture and stoked Afghan fears that it will interfere with several critical dam projects.<sup>30</sup> Iran provides 5–10 percent of Iraq's electricity—even more in border provinces—but many Iraqis believe that Iran manipulates these supplies for political ends. Iran is likewise seeking a role in Syria's reconstruction.<sup>31</sup> U.S. information operations should highlight these manipulative practices to demonstrate how Tehran buys covert influence, and keeps its neighbors down to build Iran up.

**WAGE RELENTLESS INFORMATION WARFARE.** Tehran presents itself as a dependable partner, a formidable adversary, and a rising power. Its successes in extending its influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have enhanced its standing in the eyes of supporters, while unnerving adversaries. Its spin has often been undercut, however, by a tendency to engage in vain and provocative boasts, to meddle in neighbors' affairs, and to lecture and condescend toward others, particularly Arabs. It also presents itself as a potential partner in fighting Salafi-jihadist terrorism. The United States should highlight the gap between Iran's words and deeds by publicizing human rights violations there, corruption in high places, and by publishing data on how much the Islamic Republic spends to fuel conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza at the expense of the needs of the Iranian people. Hopefully, this will further deepen discontent in Iran over its involvement in far-flung conflicts.<sup>32</sup>

The United States should also continue to publish captured documents that demonstrate Iran's tacit support for groups like al-Qaeda,<sup>33</sup> and highlight how Iran uses its Shia foreign legion as cannon fodder in Syria—to sharpen latent resentments among some of these groups<sup>34</sup> toward their often overbearing Iranian patrons.<sup>35</sup> And it should emphasize wedge issues among

Tehran's partners, such as Hezbollah's recent transfer of several hundred Islamic State fighters to Syria's border with Iraq in return for the bodies of several Lebanese soldiers—a move that angered Baghdad because it solved Hezbollah's problem at the expense of Iraq.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, when appropriate, Washington should disclose the identity of Iranian agents operating on foreign soil to host nation intelligence services in ways that make clear that their cover has been blown, effectively forcing their recall, as it did during "Operation Sapphire," following the 1996 Khobar Towers attack.<sup>37</sup> There are limits, however, to the effectiveness of such activities. While publicizing Tehran's arms transfers to its proxies in violation of various United Nations resolutions may be useful for rallying international support against Iran, Washington should not assume that such action will have a "shaming" effect on Iran. While the Islamic Republic uses discreet methods to transfer these arms to avoid their interdiction, it does little to obscure the source of these arms or its role in such activities—perhaps because it believes in and insists on the legitimacy of these activities and the causes its supports.<sup>38</sup>

## GEOGRAPHIC ARENAS

The United States should focus its efforts to counter Iran's influence in the four main arenas where U.S. interests are most jeopardized by it, by working to: (1) contest and limit Iranian influence in Iraq; (2) deny pro-regime forces in Syria a clear-cut victory; (3) manage the costs of war in Yemen; and (4) deter Hezbollah from steps that could lead to a war with Israel. Moreover, the United States should counter Iranian efforts to create external bases of support for its policies wherever they occur.

**IRAQ: CONTESTING INFLUENCE.** Iraq is the geopolitical fulcrum of efforts to disrupt Iran's so-called land bridge to the Levant; as long as Iraq remains contested terrain, Iran's ability to project power into the Levant will be subject to a degree of uncertainty. The key for Washington is to remain engaged. Here, the United States will find willing partners. Most mainstream Iraqi politicians—such as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi—want the United States to remain in Iraq so that Iran does not become the uncontested foreign power there. Yet if the U.S. goal elsewhere in the region is to impose costs on Iran, in Iraq it is to deny Iran a paramount role, and to prevent Iraq from becoming an arena of

conflict that could jeopardize the safety of the more than six thousand U.S. military personnel and many more civilians there.

To avert such an outcome, the United States and key allies, including Sunni-majority Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, should commit to a long-term security assistance relationship with Baghdad, to include training for the Iraqi security forces (ISF), counterterrorism security assistance to prevent the return of the Islamic State, and help securing Iraq's borders.<sup>39</sup> Washington should preserve the primacy of the armed forces in the security sector and counter the influence of Iran-backed PMF units by ensuring that the ISF remains capable of being the lead force in dealing with security threats to Iraq, by working with Baghdad to prevent the creation of security and social-welfare vacuums that Iran-backed PMF might fill, and by highlighting the decisive contribution of the ISF to the defeat of the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup> It should likewise conduct a sustained inform-and-influence campaign targeting the Iraqi public that documents malign Iranian activities there, including unfair business practices, undue political influence, and the sponsorship of violence against Iraqis—especially by Iran-backed PMF.<sup>41</sup> And Washington should periodically warn Tehran<sup>42</sup> that it will not tolerate attacks by Iran's proxies on U.S. personnel in Iraq<sup>43</sup> or elsewhere, making clear that Iranian advisors throughout the region are no less vulnerable to U.S. drone strikes than are the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

**SYRIA: FREEZING THE CONFLICT.** In Syria, the Trump administration seeks to defeat the Islamic State, consolidate military gains through stabilization assistance and de-escalation agreements, and reach a negotiated solution to Syria's civil war<sup>44</sup>—while avoiding a clash with pro-regime forces there.<sup>45</sup> But neither the Obama<sup>46</sup> nor the Trump<sup>47</sup> administration did much while pro-regime forces smashed U.S.-supported opposition groups. This has undermined U.S. credibility and left it with few tools to shape developments in the place where Iran is most vulnerable to pushback, and most crucial to its efforts to project power in the region.

But hard is not hopeless,<sup>48</sup> and the United States needs to create options in Syria. To this end, it should consider a limited, revitalized train-and-equip program for non-Islamist rebel groups (or what is left of them)—not to pursue the unattainable goal of overthrowing the Assad regime, but to deny pro-regime forces a clear-cut victory by creating a balance between remaining rebel

enclaves and pro-regime forces. The goal would be to shore up shaky ceasefires and stabilize de-escalation zones, and to forestall shifts in the military balance as the regime rearms, in order to deter renewed attacks on remaining rebel-held areas and prevent new, destabilizing mass refugee flows into neighboring states and Europe. This might also tie down pro-regime forces in Syria, limiting their ability to make trouble elsewhere in the region.

Likewise, the United States should commit to a long-term relationship with the Syrian Kurdish PYD and its Arab partners to dissuade them from reaching accommodations with the Assad regime.<sup>49</sup> This partnership may also deny Iran a land bridge to the Mediterranean through northern Syria.

Finally, the United States should maintain clandestine ties with non-Salafi rebels in areas retaken by pro-regime forces, to discourage them from joining jihadist organizations as they regroup and to preserve a proxy warfare option against pro-regime forces. The possibility that the United States might be a spoiler in Syria might deter Iran from targeting U.S. personnel elsewhere, as overstretched pro-regime forces must secure long, exposed lines of communication through majority-Sunni regions, where they could be vulnerable to a covert, cost-imposing strategy using local proxies. The return of pro-regime forces to Sunni-majority areas of Syria may well spur renewed violence against the regime and its supporters. The United States should try to shape this development, if it occurs, by supporting non-Salafi opposition elements if it makes sense for it to do so. Here, countering Iranian influence and preventing the Islamic State's return are complementary rather than conflicting goals.

**YEMEN: MANAGING THE COSTS OF WAR.** The death of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh at the hands of his erstwhile Houthi allies will further complicate efforts to end the conflict in Yemen and should prompt a reassessment of U.S. options there.<sup>50</sup> Tehran supports the Houthis for opportunistic reasons, at least in part because this support imposes heavy costs on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, diverts their attention from Iran's activities in the Levant and the Gulf, and provides it with a means to disrupt freedom of navigation through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthis have been drawn into Tehran's orbit by a lack of alternatives, and as the war drags on, they could

become an Iranian proxy—if they are not already well on the way to being one.

The challenge for the anti-Houthi coalition, then, is to: (1) find places where the Houthis can be pressured militarily with fewer adverse humanitarian consequences,<sup>51</sup> while containing the threat to the Bab al-Mandab Strait; (2) prevent the consolidation of the Houthi-Iran relationship by holding out the possibility of a negotiated end to the war; (3) impose a more targeted blockade on the Houthis to deny them the arms needed to prosecute the war, while mitigating Yemen's humanitarian crisis;<sup>52</sup> (4) avoid spending so much blood and treasure on the war that it destabilizes the politics and economies of the Gulf Arab region and prevents them from responding to Iranian challenges in the Gulf and Levant; and (5) mitigate the disastrous humanitarian consequences of their military campaign lest their cause lose international support. The United States needs to do more to help the anti-Houthi coalition balance these competing objectives.

Initial U.S. efforts to push back against Iran's regional influence have consisted of information activities focusing attention on Iranian activities in Yemen,<sup>53</sup> but it is unclear what practical steps will be taken to follow up on these shaping operations, or whether other arenas where Iran is active will eventually be targeted.

#### ISRAEL: DETERRING OR DEFEATING HEZBOLLAH.

The overwhelming imperative for the United States in the Levant is to prevent another Hezbollah-Israel war.<sup>54</sup> Yet U.S. policy in recent years may have made such a war more likely. By not providing more support to the non-Islamist opposition in Syria, the United States made the success of the Assad regime and its allies more likely. This may embolden them to build on their military successes and overreach—just as Hezbollah's success in ousting Israel from Lebanon in 2000, and Hamas's success in ousting Israel from Gaza in 2005, encouraged Hezbollah and Hamas to engage in activities that provoked additional wars. There are already signs that the success of pro-regime forces in Syria has emboldened them to push back against Israel.<sup>55</sup> Israel has conducted about a hundred airstrikes in Syria since 2012 against arms convoys, weapons depots, and production facilities involved in the provision of arms for Hezbollah, so in some ways, the war has already started.<sup>56</sup>

To prevent these “campaigns between wars”<sup>57</sup> from intensifying and expanding, the United States should

make clear that it will do the following: provide Israel the diplomatic and military cover needed to successfully wage war—even in the face of Russian opposition; augment Israel's rocket and missile defenses with U.S. sea- and land-based systems; provide Israel with penetrator and other munitions required to deal with hardened underground bunkers and weapons factories; and provide Israel with the intelligence needed to interdict Shia militias heading to the front from Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Finally, the United States should make clear that it will agree to end the war only when conditions for an enduring ceasefire have been met, and it should quietly warn Hezbollah and the Assad regime that the damage inflicted by a war with Israel could reignite civil wars in Lebanon and Syria.

**THE LAST RESORT—FOMENTING UNREST.** Tehran has long used the threat of instability and subversion to intimidate and deter its enemies, including the United States; Washington should be prepared to turn the tables on the Islamic Republic. Iran's leaders believe the U.S. “soft war” to subvert and undermine the Islamic Republic is a greater threat than military strikes or an invasion.<sup>58</sup> The current bout of unrest in Iran has undoubtedly intensified these concerns. The United States should leverage this fear to deter Iran from targeting U.S. personnel and interests in the region. To do so, the United States should prepare a political warfare campaign consisting of psychological warfare operations, the sabotage of economic targets, and the arming of restive Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch minorities (among others) to destabilize the Islamic Republic.<sup>59</sup> These activities might not threaten the survival of the regime, but could force it to divert resources from regional power projection to internal security. Because these actions would cross several of Tehran's redlines and could prompt it to respond with terrorism and cyberattacks, it would be best to keep such an option in reserve, to be used only in extremis, in response to Iranian attacks on U.S. personnel and interests in the region. But the knowledge that Washington could do so, and further complicate Iran's internal security situation, might deter the Islamic Republic from targeting U.S. personnel and interests in the first place.

**MANAGING ESCALATION.** With Tehran buoyed by a series of military successes and its forces operating in proximity to U.S. forces in several places in the region,

there is a heightened potential for escalation—especially if Washington projects weakness, or crosses redlines that demarcate vital Iranian interests. (However, as long as civil unrest in Iran continues, the Islamic Republic will likely act with greater caution vis-à-vis the United States, to avoid simultaneous internal and external crises.) To manage the risk of escalation,<sup>60</sup> Washington should respond firmly when tested, lest inaction invite further challenges. Its responses should be unpredictable and should target assets that Tehran truly values, to make it hard for Iran to calibrate the risks and costs of brinkmanship. Washington should generally avoid crossing Tehran’s redlines—except when responding in kind to Iranian provocations, or when justified by broader policy considerations.

These redlines include: (1) direct U.S. attacks on Iranian personnel or on Iran itself; (2) attempts to shut down its oil exports; (3) threats to its territorial integrity; (4) overt efforts to foment regime change in Tehran. Furthermore, Washington should seek broad international support for its actions, as Tehran is less likely to challenge such actions if doing so will alienate key actors in Europe and Asia that it has been courting. And the United States should strengthen policy coordination with its Gulf Arab allies, so that the latter do not take unilateral steps that might lead to an escalation between Iran and the United States. (Indeed, Houthi attacks on U.S. warships in the Bab al-Mandab suggest that this may have already occurred.) Finally, the United States should bear in mind that although Tehran will often back down from a confrontation if potential costs outweigh benefits and if vital interests are not threatened, it will often renew the challenge at another time and place.

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## Missiles

Missiles are central to Iran’s strategy<sup>61</sup> and support all three legs of its deterrent/warfighting triad. These consist of the ability to: (1) threaten navigation through the Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab Straits; (2) engage in proxy subversion and terrorism on several continents; and (3) conduct long-range strikes using rockets and missiles against targets throughout the region. Accordingly, rockets and missiles are critical to Iran’s efforts to intimidate and demoralize its enemies.<sup>62</sup> Rockets and missiles are also central to the “way of war” of Iran’s proxies and partners. Hezbollah and Hamas can

target all of Israel, and the Houthis can target large swaths of the Arabian Peninsula with such capabilities, provided by Iran.

UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which gave legal force to the nuclear deal with Iran, “called upon [it] not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.”<sup>63</sup> However, Iran has acted in defiance of the resolution by conducting a large number of missile launches since then. Because missiles are so important to Iran’s efforts to transform the regional balance of power, Tehran is unlikely to accede to limits on its missile program that go beyond those it accepted in the past: (1) a slowdown in missile testing noted during the negotiation of the JCPOA;<sup>64</sup> and (2) a declared 2,000 km range limit that it claims to have observed since 2011.<sup>65</sup> However, neither limit would have a meaningful impact on Iran’s missile capabilities without a concomitant freeze on its cruise missile and satellite/space launch vehicle programs (the range of Iran’s main cruise missile may exceed this limit) or on the transfer of missiles to proxies and partners—which enables Iran to evaluate their performance in actual combat.

Absent such limits, the United States must bolster efforts to constrain Iran’s missile program through multilateral action. Targeted sanctions on individuals and entities engaged in the procurement of equipment, technology, and special materials for the missile program impose delays and costs on these efforts and should continue, but such efforts generally have a limited and ephemeral impact. More useful would be sanctions on entities and companies in Iran that are part of the supply chain for its missile program.<sup>66</sup> These kinds of sanctions could have a potentially significant impact, as they would affect previously unsanctioned sectors, and could have broad ripple effects on Iran’s economy. Washington should redouble efforts to press other countries to tighten export controls, as prohibited items continue to show up in Iran,<sup>67</sup> and to interdict the transfer of rockets and missiles to Iran’s proxies and partners. To counter this possibility, Iran is building missile-production facilities in Lebanon (for Hezbollah), Syria, and Yemen (for the Houthis)<sup>68</sup> to provide its partners with an indigenous production capability. This emerging threat will need to be addressed as well.

The United States needs to further strengthen its own and partner-nation capabilities to kill missiles and their supporting infrastructure prior to launch through aerial



strikes and long-range precision fires. These capabilities also provide an ability to respond in kind to Iranian missile strikes, strengthening deterrence. The United States should likewise encourage its Gulf Arab allies to further strengthen and better integrate their missile defenses<sup>69</sup>—lest their capabilities remain less than the sum of their parts—and to create robust civil defenses (Israel’s are already well developed). After all, Iran’s missile force is a problem to which there is a solution, albeit a very costly one. In this way, Iran’s massive investment in rockets and missiles may be countered and mitigated. This, however, will require changes in the political and strategic cultures of the Gulf Arab states.

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### **Enforcing and Building on the Nuclear Deal**

The JCPOA is problematic because it provides Iran with a patient path to nuclear-threshold-state status—or even a nuclear weapon.<sup>70</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to tear it up, or to be seen by the international community as provoking a nuclear crisis with Iran; this would isolate the United States, greatly complicate the reimposition of sanctions should it prove necessary, and provide Iran with a pretext to resume nuclear activities it has temporarily foresworn. And it could foment a new nuclear crisis with Iran while the United States is struggling to manage a slow-motion nuclear crisis with North Korea.

Instead, Washington should seek to preserve for as long as possible the partial rollback of Iran’s nuclear program achieved by the JCPOA—particularly the one-year breakout time. And it should devise a strategy for using the time bought by the deal to avert or prepare for a nuclear crisis with Iran as the constraints imposed by the agreement are lifted. Thus, Washington should work with allies to enforce the deal and strengthen it by addressing its shortcomings, as well as the shortcomings of the international nonproliferation regime; to create a framework of incentives and disincentives to shape Iran’s future proliferation calculus, and dissuade it from building an industrial-scale nuclear infrastructure; and to enhance America’s ability to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout.

The recent bout of unrest in Iran does not alter this calculus. Foreign investors who had considered entering the Iranian market will stay away—at least for

now, if not indefinitely. The snapback of nuclear sanctions would thus be superfluous, and could enable the regime to redirect the ire of protesting Iranians against the United States. Rather, Washington should pass a raft of new human rights sanctions targeting Iranian officials and entities and associated businesses.

### **STRENGTHEN THE NONPROLIFERATION REGIME**

The JCPOA has a number of critical shortcomings. It allows Iran to continue research and development on advanced centrifuges, which could be used in a clandestine parallel nuclear program or to enable a rapid breakout.<sup>71</sup> It lacks a verification regime for possible weapons-related activities—so there is no way to know whether low-signature weapons-design work is continuing.<sup>72</sup> And it sunsets enhanced monitoring arrangements and limits on fuel-cycle-related activities after ten to fifteen years, permitting Iran to build an industrial-scale nuclear infrastructure should it desire to do so. Experience suggests, moreover, that building a consensus with key allies about how to deal with these shortcomings could take years. While Iran’s compliance with its JCPOA commitments<sup>73</sup>—at least for now—buys time for diplomacy to develop a common approach on these matters, loopholes in the JCPOA that could enable Iran to engage in proscribed activities unobserved lend some urgency to this effort. Meanwhile, the United States should strictly enforce the nuclear deal by rebuffing future Iranian efforts to test limits, exceed caps, and carve out “exceptions” to the accord (regarding, e.g., “unrecoverable” low-enriched uranium deposits in piping, excess heavy water stocks, and the number of large hot cells it is permitted).<sup>74</sup>

One way to address the shortcomings of the JCPOA would be a “more for more” agreement with Tehran in which the United States and its allies would go beyond their JCPOA commitments regarding investment in Iran, if Iran were to go beyond its JCPOA commitments regarding enhanced monitoring, limits on centrifuge R&D, the sunset of limits on fuel-cycle-related activities, and limits on its missile program. Such an agreement would supplement the JCPOA and would not require its renegotiation—an option that Iran has ruled out.<sup>75</sup> But the drawbacks of this approach far exceed its benefits, at least for now, as it would front-load tangible financial benefits

for Iran that the latter could use to pay for destabilizing regional activities and arms transfers, in return for commitments regarding future behavior that it could renege on after having pocketed the benefits. A “more for more” agreement only makes sense, if at all, several years down the road, when the lifting of the constraints on Iran’s nuclear program is imminent.

Absent a “more for more” deal that imposes additional limits on fuel-cycle-related activities and enhanced monitoring, the United States and its allies should press the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to obtain a fuller understanding of Iran’s centrifuge production capabilities, and more extensive monitoring of centrifuge-related manufacturing sites—including workshops at military facilities.<sup>76</sup> They should also press the IAEA to implement a verification regime for weapons-related activities at military and other sites.<sup>77</sup> Much of Iran’s past weapons work occurred at such sites, and the IAEA’s inability to visit them on a routine basis raises questions about its ability to verify Iran’s compliance with the JCPOA. Washington should likewise draft legislation that would trigger snapback nuclear sanctions if Iran were to reduce its breakout time to less than a year while building bipartisan support for such a law, and should encourage key allies to do the same.<sup>78</sup>

The United States should also seek international support for efforts to apply more broadly, on a bilateral basis (since Russia and others oppose their adoption on a universal basis), the JCPOA’s limitations regarding fuel-cycle activities, fissile-material enrichment levels and stockpile size, as well as the monitoring and verification procedures it mandates, so that they no longer apply specifically to Iran. This could make it more difficult for the Islamic Republic to not abide indefinitely by key provisions of the agreement.<sup>79</sup>

The United States should also work with the international community to address shortcomings in the nuclear nonproliferation safeguards regime and the Additional Protocol (AP), which will be the principal constraint on Iran’s nuclear program once the monitoring arrangements established by the JCPOA are lifted. In particular, they should seek expanded authority for the IAEA under the AP to access personnel, information, and sites, and press the UNSC to pass a generic UNSC resolution under Article 41 of the UN Charter that should direct that if any state is found in noncompliance with its nuclear nonproliferation obligations:

the IAEA would be temporarily granted expanded access rights to resolve outstanding issues; the non-compliant state would suspend all nuclear-fuel-cycle-related activities; and the IAEA would conclude more stringent facility-specific safeguards agreements for all nuclear facilities.<sup>80</sup> To do so, however, the United States will have to overcome Russian opposition to changes in the safeguards regime.<sup>81</sup>

## FORGE A CONSENSUS

As long as Iran is engaged in destabilizing activities (e.g., transferring arms to Hezbollah and the Houthis in violation of UNSC Resolutions 1701 and 2216, respectively) and that prevent the JCPOA from achieving the goal, set forth in the preface to the agreement, of “positively contribut(ing) to regional and international peace and security,” the United States should quietly discourage nuclear supplier states from engaging in nuclear-fuel-cycle-related cooperation with it. While the JCPOA encourages the parties to the accord to engage in peaceful nuclear cooperation with Iran where appropriate, none specifically are obligated to do so, just as Iran is not obliged to acquire nuclear-fuel-cycle-related technology from any particular supplier state. Tehran should understand that in the long run, there is an inevitable relationship between its respect for UNSCRs and its regional behavior, and the sustainability of the JCPOA.

The United States should also try to assemble a broad coalition of states to convince Iran to forgo its option under the JCPOA to build an industrial-scale nuclear infrastructure once restrictions on its program are lifted after fifteen years. To this end, the United States should launch a sustained information campaign to counter Tehran’s nuclear narrative. The goal should be to convince the Iranian people and the regime of the risks posed by nuclear-fuel-cycle facilities, particularly reactors, in the event of a major earthquake (nearly all of Iran is an active seismic zone) or in wartime, when they may be targeted by terrorists or neighboring states.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, the United States should try to shape international perceptions regarding Iran’s compliance with the letter and the spirit of the JCPOA, so that if Iran continues with destabilizing activities that violate UN resolutions, Iran’s efforts to procure sensitive dual-use items and nuclear technology will be met with a presumption of denial by the overwhelming majority of supplier states.

## BOLSTER DETERRENCE

Finally, Washington should leverage the enhanced credibility conferred by its pushback against Iran's destabilizing regional policies to strengthen its ability to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout.<sup>83</sup> It should continue to build up intelligence and cyberspying capabilities in support of non- and counterproliferation activities, and should work to convince Tehran that traditional intelligence tradecraft and novel cyber capabilities ensure that the United States will almost certainly detect an attempted nuclear breakout by Iran. The United States should further emphasize that it will use all means at its disposal to prevent such an eventuality. To reinforce this point and ensure the military option remains viable, the United States should continue work on advanced conventional penetrator munitions,<sup>84</sup> electromagnetic pulse weapons, and other capabilities that will be necessary to deal with nuclear facilities hidden in plain view (in urban or industrial settings) or in hardened, deeply buried bunkers.

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## Conclusion

Given the urgency of the challenge, the priority for U.S. policy should be to work with allies and partners to counter Iran's regional activities, while avoiding escalation or a direct conflict with Iran—and, of course, Russia. Restoring U.S. credibility is job number one, and to this end, Washington should avoid the grand pronouncements and token measures that have so often undermined U.S. credibility in the past. Restoring U.S. credibility is best accomplished by consistent actions over time that demonstrate American resolve and commitment, including, *inter alia*: pushing back on Iranian naval harassment in the Persian Gulf; interdicting Iranian arms shipments to its proxies and partners; supporting action by regional allies against Iranian weapons factories being built in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen; committing to a long-term security-assistance relationship with Iraq that will ensure the security primacy of the ISF; supporting remaining non-Salafi rebel forces in Syria in order to deny pro-regime forces a clear-cut victory and deter new regime offensives; and using all the instruments of national power to impose political, economic, and military costs on Tehran. And Washington should consider sanctions on Iranian entities and com-

panies that are part of the supply chain for its missile program, which would affect previously unsanctioned sectors of the economy.

Meanwhile, Washington should work with its European allies to deter Tehran from crushing Iran's nascent opposition movement by threatening, and, if need be, imposing, human rights sanctions and diplomatically isolating Iran. The goal should be to create the political space for opposition protests to continue, and thereby force the regime to dedicate ever greater resources to internal security operations. Moreover, the longer the protests continue, the greater the chance the regime will take measures that further isolate it, and that may cause more Iranians to join the demonstrations.

More broadly, the United States should eschew overt activities within Iran's borders, except as an in-kind response to Iranian actions. Thus, Washington should quietly warn Tehran that if it encourages or undertakes attacks on U.S. personnel or U.S. interests, or conducts cyberattacks on U.S. critical infrastructure, the United States would respond in kind, and could destabilize Iran by providing moral and material support to mainstream opposition forces and restive minorities there.

Finally, the United States should leverage the enhanced credibility engendered by a policy of regional pushback to work with allies to enforce the JCPOA, fix its shortcomings, and strengthen the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. It should work with these allies to create a framework of incentives and disincentives to shape Tehran's future proliferation calculus, and to dissuade it from reducing its breakout time to less than a year or building an industrial-scale nuclear infrastructure. And the United States should work to enhance its ability to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout and, if need be, to destroy the program from afar. However, this strategy entails significant risk. A failure to effectively counter Iran's ongoing regional activities—through inaction, ineptitude, or both—could have serious consequences for efforts to deter a future nuclear breakout by Iran, and for U.S. credibility in the Middle East and beyond. Inaction, however, also entails significant short-term risk, as Iran's activities in Syria and Yemen—if unchecked—may increase the prospects for war, and thus produce an outcome that any administration would presumably want to avoid.

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