

## Were Iran and the United States Really ‘On the Brink’? Observations on Gray Zone Conflict

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Articles & Testimony

**Tehran's entire modus operandi is designed to pressure Washington and its allies but avoid all-out conflict, and distorting this reality so close to a U.S. election will only hinder an effective policy response.**

A popular narrative to emerge during the past year of Iran-U.S. tensions is that on several occasions—particularly after the killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January—Iran and the United States were on the “brink (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/us/politics/iran-trump-administration.html>) of ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-military-to-maintain-an-expanded-presence-in-the-mideast-following-iran-strikes-general-says/2020/01/23/4b1972e0-3e05-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-military-to-maintain-an-expanded-presence-in-the-mideast-following-iran-strikes-general-says/2020/01/23/4b1972e0-3e05-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455_story.html)) war (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/politics/iran-trump.html>).” This narrative has been promoted by Iranian officials who encourage the belief—as part of their efforts to deter the United States—that a local clash could easily escalate to an “all-out (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/19/middleeast/iran-zarif-saudi-intl/index.html>)” war. It has likewise been promoted by President Trump, who stated in a private talk to TV anchors in February, with typical bravado, that war with Iran was “closer than you thought (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-war-with-iran-was-closer-than-you-thought-11580857178>).” And it has been promoted by a variety of journalists (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/world/middleeast/iran-us-relations.html>), academics ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/this-is-how-easily-the-us-and-iran-could-blunder-into-war/2019/05/23/40dbbcae-7c07-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/this-is-how-easily-the-us-and-iran-could-blunder-into-war/2019/05/23/40dbbcae-7c07-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17_story.html)) and think tank analysts (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/205-averting-middle-east-1914-moment>). Yet, this widely accepted version of events distorts reality, precludes a clear-headed understanding of Iranian and U.S. actions, and hinders an effective policy response.

The counterpressure campaign that Iran launched in May 2019 against America's “maximum pressure” policy (the ostensible goal of which is a better deal with Iran covering nuclear, regional and military issues) has relied on activities in the “gray zone (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus162-Eisenstadt-v3.pdf>)” between war and peace. These include covert or unacknowledged attacks on petrochemical infrastructure and transportation in the Gulf, proxy attacks on U.S. military personnel in Iraq, and clandestine cyber operations. Indeed, Iran is perhaps the world's foremost practitioner of gray zone operations (although [China and Russia](#) ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2900/RR2942/RAND\\_RR2942.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2900/RR2942/RAND_RR2942.pdf)) have also long employed this modus operandi). For nearly four decades, Americans have struggled to understand and to respond effectively to this asymmetric “way of war.”

Actors operating in the gray zone test and probe to determine what they can get away with. They engage in covert or unacknowledged proxy activities to preserve deniability and avoid becoming decisively engaged with the adversary. They rely on incremental action to create ambiguity regarding their intentions, and to make their enemies uncertain about how to respond. And they arrange their activities in time and space—pacing them and spacing them geographically—so that adversary decision-makers do not feel pressured to act rashly. This enables them to challenge stronger adversaries and advance their own agendas while managing risk, preventing escalation and avoiding war. In gray zone competitions there is no well-defined brink that marks the transition from peace to war. Rather, these are murky, ambiguous, slow-motion conflicts characterized by occasional escalatory peaks and deescalatory troughs.

Iran's gray zone strategy works by leveraging a number of differences in the way that Tehran and Washington think and operate. The most important of these differences is conceptual. U.S. decision-makers have tended to conceive of war and peace with Iran (as well as with other significant state actors such as China and Russia) in stark, binary terms and have frequently been constrained by fear of escalation—creating opportunities for Iran (and others) to act in the gray zone “in between.” (The main exception here—by and large [a relatively recent one](#) (<https://news.yahoo.com/secret-trump-order-gives-cia-more-powers-to-launch-cyberattacks-090015219.html>))—is in the [cyber domain](#) ([https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658-1/-1/1/CYBER\\_STRATEGY\\_SUMMARY\\_FINAL.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658-1/-1/1/CYBER_STRATEGY_SUMMARY_FINAL.PDF))). By contrast, Tehran tends to see conflict as a continuum. The key terrain in gray zone conflicts, then, is the gray matter in the heads of those American policymakers who believe that a local clash could somehow rapidly escalate to an all-out war. The result is often U.S. inaction, which provides gray zone operators such as Iran greater freedom to act.

Tehran's interest in avoiding war and its preference for operating in the gray zone are not grounded in a transitory calculation of the regime's interests; it is a deeply rooted feature of [the regime's strategic culture](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-strategic-culture-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-religion-expediency-a>) that is reflected in its way of war (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-of-war>), as well as the Islamic Republic's strategy under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This is one of the enduring legacies of the Iran-Iraq War, which [killed nearly](#) (<https://www.scielo.br/pdf/rsp/v41n6/6852.pdf>) a quarter-million Iranians (<https://kurzman.unc.edu/death-tolls-of-the-iran-iraq-war/>), and left the country with still-unhealed wounds. Iran is determined to never again repeat that experience. Likewise, for the United States, the long and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have seared in the nation's consciousness a strong desire to avoid future Middle Eastern “forever wars.”

Thus, Tehran's entire modus operandi is intended to prevent escalation and avoid war. During the first seven months of the counterpressure campaign that it launched in spring 2019, all of Iran's attacks were [nonlethal-by design](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-special-rep/special-report-time-to-take-out-our-swords-inside-irans-plot-to-attack-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1XZ16H>). Iranian forces placed limpet mines on the hulls of oil tankers, targeted unmanned U.S. reconnaissance aircraft, and conducted precision strikes against sparsely staffed Saudi oil facilities. When these initial steps did not induce Washington to respond militarily, or to lift or ease the economic sanctions imposed after it left the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018, the Islamic Republic escalated in the space left by U.S. inaction with [a series of progressively larger rocket attacks](#) (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/collecting-and-analyzing-shiite-militia-attacks-against-the-u-s-presence-in-iraq.php>) in Iraq by its Kataib Hezbollah (KH) proxy, until an American was killed there in late December. This set in motion a series of events—a U.S. counterstrike that killed 25 KH militiamen, violent demonstrations in front of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad by pro-Iran proxies (evoking dark memories of the 1979-1981 Tehran embassy hostage crisis and [the 2012 murder of U.S. Amb](#) (

[embassy-baghdad-attack/](https://time.com/5885388/us-embassy-baghdad-attack/)) (<https://time.com/5885388/us-embassy-baghdad-attack/>) Christopher Stevens (<https://time.com/5885388/us-embassy-baghdad-attack/>) by Libyan terrorists), and tweeted taunts by Khamenei that America “cannot do a damn thing (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-iran-khamenei/irans-khamenei-strongly-condemns-us-attacks-in-iraq-tv-idUSKBN1Z01N0>)”—that prompted the United States to target Soleimani and KH commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in early January.

Yet, when Iran retaliated five days later with a missile strike on Al-Asad air base, it gave advance warning (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-early-warning/hours-of-forewarning-saved-us-iraqi-lives-from-irans-missile-attack-idUSKBN1ZC218>) to the Iraqi government so that Americans there had time to shelter. (U.S. intelligence (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/us/politics/trump-iran-suleimani.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>) had also picked up warning signs ([https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks](https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks/American%20Airmen's%20Accounts%20of%20Iranian%20Missile%20Attacks)) of an imminent missile strike.) Afterward, both the United States and Iran signaled publicly (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/07/politics/rockets-us-airbase-iraq/index.html>) that they considered the current round over, although rocket fire against U.S. personnel and facilities (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/collecting-and-analyzing-shiite-militia-attacks-against-the-u-s-presence-in-iraq.php>) in Iraq has continued since then (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-attacks-on-us-forces-in-iraq-became-a-new-normal/#:~:text=Rocket%20attacks%20on%20Iraqi%20bases,kind%20of%20normal%20in%20Iraq.&text=The%20more%20recent%20targeting%20of,been%20done%20with%2010>). Khamenei subsequently warned that the Islamic Republic “will never forget the martyrdom of Hajj Qassem Soleimani...and will inevitably strike a similar blow against the U.S. ([https://twitter.com/ar\\_khamenei/status/1285625599697068032?s=20](https://twitter.com/ar_khamenei/status/1285625599697068032?s=20))”

This sequence of events should demonstrate that the United States and Iran were *not* on the brink of war in January, for several reasons. First, events following the killing of Soleimani indicate that risk and escalation management were priorities for both Tehran and Washington; nothing that has happened since alters this assessment. Second, for more than 40 years, Iran and the United States have avoided war—despite Iranian-supported kidnappings and attacks in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq that have killed hundreds of American (<https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-special-representative-hook-and-ambassador-sales/>); clashes at sea toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War that killed scores of Iranian sailors (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-of-conflict-a-history-of-u-s-iranian-confrontation-at-sea>); the accidental U.S. shooting down of an Iranian passenger jet in 1988 that killed all 290 passengers; and numerous other incidents. And finally, since 2017, Israel has launched hundreds of strikes (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israel-attacked-1-000-iranian-and-hezbollah-targets-in-syria-since-2017-1.9071536>) on Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, killing at least eight members of the IRGC (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-military-insists-only-eight-servicemen-killed-in-all-israeli-air-raids-in-syria/30732723.html>) (according to Iranian sources), without sparking a war.

Yet, history is replete with examples of war through miscalculation—and both the United States and Iran have each miscalculated at least once already. The U.S. maximum pressure policy crossed an Iranian redline dating to the 1980s, which states that if Iran cannot export oil, it will work to prevent any other Gulf state from exporting oil (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran/if-iran-cant-export-oil-from-gulf-no-other-country-can-irans-president-says-idUSKBN1O30M1>) either. In trying to drive Tehran’s oil exports to zero, Washington backed Iran into a corner and incentivized it to lash out with a military counterpressure campaign—a response for which the United States was inexplicably unprepared. Likewise, Iran crossed a U.S. redline (<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/reagan-defense-forum/2017/12/03/cia-director-confirms-he-sent-warning-letter-to-quds-commander/>) by killing a U.S. citizen ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pompeo-warns-iran-about-trigger-for-us-military-action-as-some-in-administration-question-aggressive-policy/2019/06/18/48bd3be0-9116-11e9-b570-6416efdc0803\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pompeo-warns-iran-about-trigger-for-us-military-action-as-some-in-administration-question-aggressive-policy/2019/06/18/48bd3be0-9116-11e9-b570-6416efdc0803_story.html))—and by organizing violent protests by its Iraqi proxies in front of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in December 2019, it likely contributed to the U.S. decision to target Soleimani and Muhandis. These episodes show, however, that while miscalculations are possible, they need not spark uncontrolled escalation or an all-out war—though it remains to be seen whether the killing of Soleimani was a master stroke or yet another miscalculation.

There are other ways the parties could stumble into a wider conflict. Tehran might be tempted to spring an October surprise (for example, perhaps the assassination of a U.S. official (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/13/iran-south-africa-ambassador-assassination-plot-413831#:~:text=The%20Iranian%20government%20is%20weighing,who%20has%20seen%20the%20intelligence>), or a humiliating military strike) to sabotage (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-push-for-regime-change-in-saudi-arabia-and-washington>) Trump’s prospects for a second term (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-push-for-regime-change-in-saudi-arabia-and-washington>)—although this could backfire and give the president a boost at the polls due to a rally-round-the-flag effect. It might also provide a pretext for a tough U.S. military response. Should the president lose reelection, Tehran might be tempted to launch a strike before Inauguration Day as a parting shot to avenge the death of Soleimani. And should Trump win a second term, Tehran will have to decide whether to initiate a military crisis to catalyze diplomacy that might yield a more comprehensive deal with Washington, or avoid provoking a triumphant and at times erratic president. But these scenarios would all involve the limited use of force by Iran, and it seems unlikely that Trump would suddenly abandon a core principle of his presidency and get the United States involved in yet another Middle East “forever war” just prior to an election, after failing in a bid for reelection or at the start of a second term. Should Iran strike before or shortly after U.S. elections, though, an unnerving series of ripostes remains a possibility. Some members of the administration might even welcome an election-eve crisis with Iran.

Moreover, should Khamenei become incapacitated or pass away, IRGC hardliners might opt for a more risk-acceptant approach toward the United States: They might launch a spectacular attack to avenge Soleimani’s death and goad the United States to withdraw its remaining troops from the region. The ascension of IRGC hardliners (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/22/iran-khamenei-legacy-youth-washing-radicals-peace-united-states/>) to positions of leadership in the post-Khamenei era would likely presage an era of heightened U.S.-Iran tensions and conflict.

Another possible path to escalation might be provided by alleged U.S. (and Israeli) covert operations in Iran and against Iranian interests in the region. These might include activities such as the sabotage in June 2019 of an underwater oil pipeline (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/07/31/iranian-oil-spills-on-syrias-shores-a-brief-osint-overview-of-an-environmental-incident/>) off the Syrian coast used to transfer crude oil from Iranian tankers to the refinery at Baniyas, the preflight explosion of an Iranian satellite launch vehicle (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/world/middleeast/trump-iran-missile-explosion-satellite-image.html>) in August 2019, and a claimed attack in October 2019 on an Iranian oil tanker (<https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/iran-attack-on-tanker-sabiti-was-government-backed>) in the Red Sea. The United States may have also played a role in the sabotage of Iran’s principal uranium enrichment facility (<https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/update-on-assessing-the-detonation-at-the-natanz-iran-centrifuge-assembly/>) at Natanz, which reports have attributed (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/world/middleeast/iran-natanz-nuclear-damage.html>) to Israel (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/lieberman-calls-to-gag-the-intelligence-official-claiming-israeli-attack-in-iran-1.8973650>).

In addition to these instances of apparently deliberate sabotage, there have also been a series of fires and explosions (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/10/mysterious-explosions-rock-iran>) at industrial sites throughout the country in the past three months. Such events are quite common in Iran, due to the country’s crumbling infrastructure and lack of a safety culture. According to a study by the U (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/21/iran%E2%80%99s-fires-and-explosions-2019-versus-2020>) nited (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/21/iran%E2%80%99s-fires-and-explosions-2019-versus-2020>) S (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/21/iran%E2%80%99s-fires-and-explosions-2019-versus-2020>) tates (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/21/iran%E2%80%99s-fires-and-explosions-2019-versus-2020>) Institute of Peace (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/21/iran%E2%80%99s-fires-and-explosions-2019-versus-2020>), the number of such events that occurred from May to mid-July of 2019 (at least 97) is about the same number as have occurred in the same period this year (at least 83). So, while some of these incidents might be a result of sabotage or cyberattacks, it seems likely that most were not.

Yet, seemingly well-sourced reports from the United States (<https://news.yahoo.com/secret-trump-order-gives-cia-more-powers-to-launch-cyberattacks-090015219.html>) and Israel (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/world/middleeast/iran-natanz-nuclear-damage.html>) bolster the impression that the two countries may be conducting their own narrowly focused, low-level gray zone campaigns (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus162-Eisenstadt-v3.pdf>) against Iran through sabotage and cyberattacks on nuclear infrastructure and strategic research and development facilities. Whether this is true or not is unimportant—perceptions are what matters. And herein lies the rub: Gray zone campaigns are generally most successful when a degree of deniability is preserved (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/killing-qassem-soleimani-was-there-better-way>).

When officials effectively confirm gray zone activities through media leaks or by other means—whether for personal, political or propaganda purposes—they obviate some of the advantages of gray zone operations. And when covert actions that humiliate the regime are combined with further pressure on Tehran—such as U.S. efforts to snap back U.N. sanctions in the wake of failed efforts to extend the ban on arms transfers to Iran—the potential grows for Iran to up the ante if and when it retaliates. But escalation—even if unlikely to lead to war—is not in the American interest, as it risks highlighting the limits of U.S. deterrence as well as Washington’s inability to protect its personnel and assets, its unwillingness to defend its allies, and the degree to which it may be constrained by domestic and foreign policy concerns. With U.S. presidential elections a little more than a month away, there is precious little chance of negotiating a new deal with Iran at this point. Increased pressure creates a heightened risk of escalation for little practical gain.

So, while claims that Iran and the United States were on the “[brink of war \(https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/21/iranian-regimes-gray-zone-war-tactics-are-the-new-/\)](https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/21/iranian-regimes-gray-zone-war-tactics-are-the-new-/)” make for dramatic headlines, they do not reflect reality. To succeed in gray zone competitions, the vocabulary and mental models derived from America’s conventional warfighting experience must be put aside, as they obfuscate rather than illuminate, and preclude the kind of clarity of thought required to avoid further escalation with Iran. At the same time, U.S. policymakers should have learned from recent experiences with Iran not to underestimate the adversary or to overestimate their own ability to deter destabilizing actions. The enemy always gets a vote, and the potential gain proffered by a contemplated course of action should be weighed against the potential for escalation and harm to America’s reputation and credibility—as well as to U.S. deterrence going forward.

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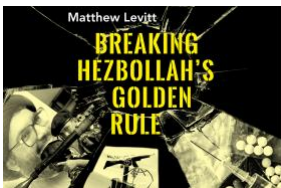
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