

Iran and the U.S. Elections: A Chance to Meddle?

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Brief Analysis

With U.S. national elections in November, would Iran try to intervene in an attempt to bring about “regime change” in Washington? No doubt, Iran would like to see President Trump defeated; he not only re-instituted U.S. economic sanctions against Iran but forced many foreign companies to do the same, crippling the Iranian economy.

Presumably, Iran would prefer to see the likely democratic candidate and former Vice President Biden elected, especially as he is likely to return the United States' Iran policy back to President Obama's 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), whereby the United States would lift its current economic sanctions in return for Iran resuming its adherence to the agreement's limits on its nuclear program. The Islamic Republic News Agency has regularly quoted criticism by Democratic politicians, including Biden, of President Trump's policies—**[such as the killing of Soleimani \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani-what-does-it-mean-for-iraq\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani-what-does-it-mean-for-iraq)**. That being said, it is less clear whether Iran has the means to actually try to have an impact on the election, despite a clearer picture of its motivations.

How States Try to Influence Elections

States try to influence the politics of other countries all the time, but shaping a specific election is more challenging and often ineffective. On the one hand, there are a number of options available to some—often stronger—states that are less likely to prove feasible for Iran.

For instance, in some cases a well-positioned state will openly declare that it prefers a certain candidate and that it will make life difficult if the target country does not elect the preferred candidate. During several recent elections, China has warned Taiwanese voters that they would suffer consequences if they elected a candidate less friendly to China. Less recently, France urged Americans to elect the Francophile Jefferson over John Adams in 1796, though Jefferson would not be elected until 1800. Given the power imbalance between the United States and Iran, the latter is obviously is not in a position to make these kinds of threats with any expectation of efficacy.

Occasionally, a country's leader will make less direct efforts to express their preference in a foreign election publicly in hopes of influencing the electorate. In 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu made known his preference for Republican Candidate Mitt Romney over President Obama in the hopes of influencing Jewish-American voters,

though the effort was met with little success. Iran does not have this kind of option either, since most Iranian-Americans detest the Iranian regime.

More often, a government will try to influence another country's election by providing clandestine support, usually through financial or, more recently, cyber intervention. Russia's Putin has given money to French nationalist Marine Le Pen, Hungary's President Viktor Orban, and other right-wing European nationalists for their campaigns. Russia also engaged in cyberattacks on the Hillary Clinton campaign in line with their preference for a Donald Trump presidency.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union provided financial support for anti-Communist and Communist candidates respectively in France and Italy, and also perhaps in Latin America. But while Iran by all accounts provides financial support for pro-Iranian candidates in Iraq and Lebanon

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-temporary-success-of-irans-proxies-in-lebanon-occludes-a-deeper-shift-i>), its modest financial resource would not have an impact on a presidential election in the United States.

Without these broader pressures at a state's disposal, however, countries will occasionally try to embarrass a country's leader in the hopes of influencing an election by using violent tactics. While it is doubtful that the Iranian students who took U.S. diplomatic personnel hostage in November 1979 intended to influence the 1980 U.S. election, the Iranian government may have come around to the idea of using the crisis to help defeat President Carter in 1980. Given that they were successful to some degree (Carter's campaign was also hurt by a bad economy), it is worth considering that Iran might weigh using its proxy forces for overt or clandestine attacks against U.S. targets to influence the 2020 election.

Reasons Why Iran May Be Cautious

Assuming that Vice President Biden is the Democratic nominee, Tehran may conclude at some point that he will probably win the election, and Tehran might leave well enough alone. But if a Trump-Biden race appeared to be close, Iran might try to resort to brazen and violent acts to embarrass President Trump. These could include—either directly or by proxy—shooting down a U.S. civilian aircraft, kidnapping U.S. citizens, or even carrying out an attack on U.S. soil. A recent trial in the New York City revealed that a Hezbollah sleeper agent, Ali Kourani, said that Hezbollah has sleeper cells in the United States designed to attack targets in the United States under extreme circumstances, such as overt hostilities between Iran and the United States.

However, Iran might shy away from such brazen acts for several reasons. First, Trump could retaliate, as he did in killing Soleimani in Baghdad. Second, overt violence might backfire, playing to Trump's benefit in an election. After all, taking American diplomatic personnel hostage in November 1979 initially benefitted President Carter politically; it was only after several months of captivity that their capture became a liability. Third, brazen acts could further alienate international public opinion at a time when Iran is particularly isolated, given its shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner in January and the mass presence of coronavirus in Iran.

Kinetic Business as Usual

Nonetheless, Iran has several slightly more prudent options to pursue. Iran continues to seek to drive out U.S. military forces from Iraq to rid Tehran of its American adversary (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-decade-of-u.s.-and-iranian-policy-towards-iraq-will-shape-2020>) and to avenge Soleimani's death last January. According to the Islamic Republic News Agency, Iranian Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, stated on March 8 that the count-down for expulsion of U.S. forces from the region has started; Shamkhani made the remarks in a meeting with the head of Iraqi National Intelligence Service, Mustafa Kadhimi.

Iran's ally, Kata'ib Hezbollah, continues to fire rockets at U.S. military forces at the al-Asad air base and less frequently at the U.S. Embassy; on March 11, they killed two U.S. and one British service members on March 11 and seriously wounded several more on March 14. U.S. retaliation against Kataib Hezbollah's concentrations on March 13 created major tension with the Iraqi government, which claimed that Iraqi military personnel were killed. Iran hopes to wear down U.S. resolve to stay and to pressure Baghdad to force the US to leave. Iran and its Iraqi militia allies would be pursuing this policy regardless of the election, but they might ramp it up even more as the election approaches.

Iran could also resume its attacks in the Gulf. In 2019, Iran attacked oil tankers, the Saudi East-West pipeline, a U.S. drone, and the gigantic Abqaiq Saudi oil complex without much of a U.S. reaction. The attacks against gulf targets seemed to have abated since the Abqaiq attack on September 14, but they could resume to embarrass Trump as the election approaches and to strike at its Saudi rival.

The Cyber Option

Because of their relatively low cost and risk, Iran might also engage in cyber-attacks against President Trump in an attempt to undermine his candidacy. It has already engaged in cyber-attacks against U.S. companies; and Iranian hackers could try to steal Republican Party information or cast aspersions on the U.S. president pretending to be American citizens on the internet. In fact, Iran would have much to learn from their sometimes partner Russia in this regard. Both countries have a common interest in undermining American elections, they just have different favorite candidates.

Conclusion

We can anticipate that attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq will continue right up to the November election and beyond. After all, even if a president Biden resumes the 2015 nuclear agreement, he may want to keep a small contingent of U.S. troops in Iraq to fight ISIS and to counter Iran (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/how-can-the-united-states-counter-iranian-influence>). Iran therefore has an interest in maintaining pressure on U.S. forces there regardless of who is in the White House. Iranian leaders believe that they have the upper hand in Iraq, given its proximity to Iran, their Iraqi militia partners, the vulnerability of a weak Iraqi regime, the mainly dovish attitude of the U.S. public towards the prospects of hostilities against Iran, and perhaps President Trump's own ambivalence about the U.S. presence there. Even if the attacks do not have much of an impact on the American electorate, Iran could claim that they helped to defeat President Trump in case he does lose: the ultimate revenge for the killing of Soleimani. ❖

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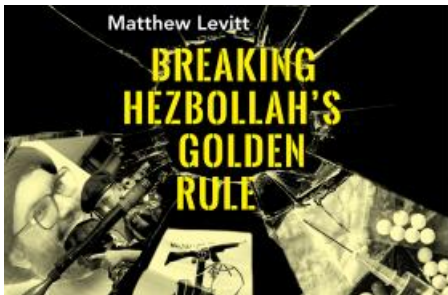
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