

Expanding the United States' Counter-Iran Strategy Outside of Iraq

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Twaseef Almogbal is a former journalist for Al-Riyadh newspaper and focuses primarily on security issues. She has expertise in political/military history and is pursuing a master's degree in Modern History with a focus on the Armenian massacres. Currently, she works as a secretary on the Board of Directors of the Saudi Society for Political Science and as a member of the International Federation of Historians.



Brief Analysis

Throughout its history, the United States has consolidated its influence and hegemony through strong relationships with countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, a region which holds a strategic geopolitical position due to their sea and land ports, along with enormous oil reserves and significant economic potential. However, this same potential has sparked many of the conflicts that the region has faced in the last century, including some of the longest-running conflicts in recent history.

Although the United States' adoption of a policy maintaining a 'balance of power' in the region over the past few decades has paid off in many cases, it is important to recognize how it has failed in others. For example, the strategy that led to the overthrow of the Iraqi regime was futile and led to a period of uncontrolled chaos, while doing nothing to balance the power between Near Eastern countries. On the contrary, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime led to the collapse of military and security institutions and opened the door to the emergence of various terrorist groups that initially disguised themselves as the Iraqi resistance, enjoying wide popular support while rejecting the American occupation in all its shapes and forms.

Now faced with the ongoing threat of Iranian hegemony in the region and the challenge it poses to American interests, the United States would do well to learn from the Iraqi case and avoid pursuing the method of 'chaos' once again. While the option of overthrowing the Iranian regime may be among those available to U.S. President Donald Trump's administration and American decision-makers, it is a distant and difficult one. This is due to the size and power of the arms that Iran has built over several decades, along with the unparalleled and continued support of the intelligence services of some great powers. Nor should the military capabilities of the Iranian regime be underestimated in these calculations.

The killing of Qassem Soleimani was a bold and unexpected move, but it appears that the United States has learned a lesson from the Iraqi model. With a combination of threats and apparent attempts at deescalating the situation, the United States appears to be seeking to avoid a strategy of sparking chaos as a way of countering Iranian influence. In

this case as well, the drawback of triggering a regional power vacuum is clear: a realignment of the region's major powers could very well push American interests to the side, and could open up the region to other players such as China through leveraging of economic soft power.

In contrast, the U.S. administration seems to have been relatively successful in their strategy of reducing the influence of the Iranian regime by attacking Iran's economy, and the most recent announcement of sanctions appears to be returning U.S. Iran policy to that model. The current U.S. administration's method of drying up Iran's sources of hard currency by going straight for the country's oil revenues is particularly effective, as it is undoubtedly the main source that feeds Tehran's treasury and what it needs to make an extended and controversial impact in the Near East region. Meanwhile, sanctions targeting Iran's steel, iron, aluminum, and copper sectors have limited Tehran's largest sources of profit from non-oil exports.

Targeting Iran's economy has had real implications for Iran's regional strategy of bolstering its influence. Without hard currency, Iran is limited in its ability to pay its regional proxies' bills and salaries and has reduced the capital available for continuing Iran's cunning propaganda industry, which has been instrumental in strengthening its regional agenda to oppose America's allies in the region.

However, if Iran chooses to continue its retaliation against U.S. forces in Iraq or elsewhere in the region, the United States may be tempted change this dynamic. Though the conflict between the United States and Iran have been traditionally confined to certain borders, the storming of the American embassy—along with the earlier attack on the American "K1" base in Kirkuk that killed an American civilian and wounded five others—prompted the United States to escalate and assassinate Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. Iran has now responded after vowing revenge for the killing of Soleimani and indeed, targeting the Ein al-Assad base in Iraq, where U.S. soldiers are stationed, with missiles, but it is unclear if this is the end of the attacks against the United States.

The American response to the recent Iranian attack on the base of "Ain Al-Assad" or upcoming attacks will determine the form and nature of any upcoming confrontation between the United States and Iran in the region. In the coming weeks, it is imperative that the United States remember what strategies have been working against Iran. The U.S. military and economic presence in Iraq has become imperative for preventing the country, if not the whole region, from completely falling under Iranian influence. Now is also the time, if the United States decides to commit itself to more actively countering Iranian influence through methods other than sanctions, to look to U.S. regional partners for opportunities to limit Iranian influence without direct confrontation—especially in those countries where civilians are already pushing back against Iranian control.

In this vein, the United States can significantly contribute to solving the Syrian crisis by forsaking its current policy of managing regional issues by proxy. The United States' small and recently diminished presence in Syria has allowed powers such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey to fill the vacuum, marginalizing the U.S. role and threatening American interests in the country. Likewise, such policy could exacerbate regional crises far beyond Syria, such as in the Golan Heights. Renewing a U.S. commitment to work against Iran's influence in Syria could be a natural outgrowth of the current situation and provide an avenue for the United States to involve itself in Syria's future, better securing American interests in the country along the way.

Yemen is also a country where recent developments have made it a point for greater U.S. involvement to secure limits on Iranian influence without direct conflict. The United States should work side by side with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to reach a settlement to the Yemeni crisis, an effort that has already begun but could benefit from greater U.S. involvement. Once such a settlement is achieved, there can be a collective effort to neutralize Iranian influence in Yemen and establish a demilitarized zone on the Yemeni-Saudi borders under the United Nations umbrella. This region would function as a security belt between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and would greatly diminish concerns about Iranian influence on the southern tip of the Gulf states.

While these are two examples of ways in which the United States can help encourage the stabilization of two countries after long periods of war, there are also numerous opportunities for the United States to work more closely with its allies already committed to pushing back against Iranian expansionism. The United States should cooperate with Saudi Arabia to tighten Iran's economic sanctions in order to achieve a balance that guarantees the security of the region and the interests of the United States. Riyadh should also activate all its intelligence capabilities, not only gathering information, but analyzing and interpreting the situation in the region to formulate a long-term strategy.

If new tactics against Iran are needed in order to ensure the United States' vision of a 'balance of power' in the MENA region, there are numerous regional opportunities available to more directly challenge Iranian expansionism without targeting Iran itself. To maintain this delicate balance, the United States and its regional allies must work together to find serious political solutions, especially in countries where Iran's agents are active, such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. ❖

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