

Bringing Diplomacy Back to the Pressure Campaign Against Iran

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Sep 23, 2019

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Brief Analysis

U.S. leadership must be buttressed not by unrealistic threats, but by deterrent actions and collective diplomacy that constrain Tehran's room for attacks while defining the path to negotiations.

The September 14 strike on Saudi Arabia is an opportunity for the United States to reset the way it pressures Iran. Restoring deterrence is critical, but no less vital is aligning U.S. diplomatic efforts with those of other powers, bringing Iran onto a negotiated path that leads away from unchecked escalation and toward a redefinition of its role in the Middle East. The Trump administration need not announce a dramatic change of course at this week's UN General Assembly meetings, but it should message key players about the importance of coupling economic pressure on Iran with preparatory work for future negotiations.

PRESSURE AT A DEAD END WITHOUT COLLECTIVE DIPLOMACY

Although Washington and Riyadh have yet to release intelligence confirming the perpetrator and origin of the devastating attack on the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, officials from both governments have repeatedly underlined Iranian culpability. Indeed, the operation's precision, scope, and sophistication suggest a capability beyond what the originally claimed perpetrators—the Houthis in Yemen—have demonstrated to date.

The Trump administration is now considering different response options, and whatever course it chooses will have a decisive impact on the credibility of U.S. deterrence in the Middle East well beyond the Saudi-Iran conflict. One thing is clear so far: the attacks dramatically demonstrated that the U.S. maximum pressure campaign lacks nimble

diplomacy and has failed at deterrence. Far from limiting Iran's destabilizing actions or bringing it to the negotiating table, the administration's sanctions-heavy approach is viewed in Tehran as a declaration of economic war **requiring escalation through a counter-pressure policy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-push-for-regime-change-in-saudi-arabia-and-washington>)**. The international community's anemic response to the summer-long string of attacks on shipping and energy infrastructure has emboldened Iranian leaders to believe they can escalate without price. Leaping several rungs up the escalatory ladder at one go, they have dared Washington to respond in kind, apparently calculating that President Trump's go-it-alone approach and publicly stated reluctance to use force will forestall any concerted response.

The time has come to acknowledge that pressure is just a means to an end, not a strategic objective in of itself. Getting Iran to renegotiate restrictions on its nuclear program and place new limitations on its ballistic missile program and regional activities can only be achieved if the United States leavens its pressure policy with diplomacy and asks for help in talking Tehran down from the escalatory ladder.

A comprehensive deal that addresses this trifecta of security threats has been the administration's ostensible policy goal since it withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018, but the content of this deal has never been publicly defined. Like its predecessor, the Trump administration has not taken a serious crack at elaborating the sequence or substance of negotiations aimed at wresting difficult regional tradeoffs out of Iran, such as stepping back from proxy sponsorship and military activities in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Although managing expectations about what such wide-ranging talks could deliver immediately would be tough, the fact remains that Washington and Europe hold powerful economic leverage over Iran and historical relations with Gulf countries that could eventually help support normalization between Tehran and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

START SMALL WITH KEY STATES, NOT A GRAND COALITION

By insisting that allies join the maximum pressure campaign and then blaming them when they do so only partially, the Trump administration has isolated itself. The unilateral U.S. approach has harmed Iran's economy with no positive effect on its regional behavior, at the cost of building European resistance to any U.S.-led effort. This estrangement even hampered a simple call for joint maritime security efforts this summer.

The drastically escalating attacks on Gulf energy architecture should be a wakeup call. Washington's priority now is to work with Europe, China, Japan, and other major international actors to reverse Iran's kinetic approach to ending its economic crisis. This means jointly isolating Tehran for the moment, while signaling to U.S. partners that Washington intends to get to negotiations down the road.

Carrying out these international efforts efficiently requires a clear division of labor. Washington's responsibility is to urgently restore deterrence, choosing from the myriad **covert ways of sending a forceful message to Tehran (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-to-counter-iran>)**. The flip side of this deterrence coin is bolstered diplomacy—in parallel to its “gray zone” activities, the administration should send coordinated messages to Iran via Beijing, Tokyo, and the E3 countries (Britain, France, and Germany) in order to reinforce the limits of what the international community will accept in the Gulf. It should then let Europe test options with Tehran on a potential landing zone.

For instance, previous consultations with the E3 led Iran to seek a line of credit allowing it export oil. When French president Emmanuel Macron mentioned this proposal during meetings in late August, President Trump signaled that he did not object, making it the first concrete proposal on the table in months.

GET THE BALL ROLLING AT THE UN

The best place to start this process is at the UN this week, where the heavy presence of world leaders offers a good forum for reshaping the debate and retaking the initiative that Iran has seized in spectacular fashion. By

engaging key players there, Washington can do more than just break itself out of isolation or put Tehran in the penalty box—it can also craft a way forward. In Europe, the E3 are best positioned to assist; in particular, Washington should enlist Macron’s personal involvement in both deterrence and engagement. Enlisting Xi Jinping is an equal priority; China’s dependence on Gulf energy and interest in lasting regional de-escalation align it with the United States strategically, notwithstanding their bilateral tensions.

Taking Yemen off the table is also crucial. For years now, the country has served as the principal battleground between Iran and the Saudis. Tehran’s small investment in the Houthi faction has paid enormous dividends, but the conflict has been horrifically destructive for Yemen and disastrous for Riyadh’s national security and reputation. The Houthis themselves are not unified around continuing the war or their relationship with Iran; accordingly, it is well past time to test their common interests with the Saudi kingdom just across the border. Riyadh is uniquely positioned **to open that channel of engagement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/its-time-for-a-serious-saudi-houthi-back-channel>)**, but it needs serious U.S. political engagement to backstop ongoing UN efforts to end the war. Washington could then ask Britain, France, Germany, and China to quietly warn Iran against playing the spoiler role with the Houthis once serious mediation is under way.

Following these steps, the United States should begin exploratory technical meetings with other members of the P5+1—Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany, though not yet Iran—regarding terms for the eventual restart of nuclear negotiations. This would send a clear message that the administration is still focused on getting back to the table. In addition, next month’s annual World Bank/IMF meetings in Washington would be a good opportunity for messaging a larger number of economic officials on what role U.S. sanctions will play in this process, thus clarifying the link between Iran’s willingness to step back from coercive efforts in the Gulf and Washington’s willingness to begin direct discussions.

At this critical juncture, diplomacy does not convey weakness, but rather an acknowledgment that the United States has multiple tools for steering Iran and its regional rivals toward a sustainable solution. Bolstered U.S. deterrence, coupled with wider consensus among great powers on how to deal with Iran diplomatically, would send a potent message to many audiences, and not just in Tehran. Iranian proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen are watching closely to see how Washington responds to a brazen attack on its Saudi partner, one that will likely have global economic repercussions. Other U.S. partners across the region are watching as well. To be effective, U.S. leadership must be buttressed not by unrealistic threats, but by actions and collective diplomacy that visibly constrain Iran’s room for further destructive acts while defining the path to negotiations.

Ambassador Barbara Leaf, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served in numerous prominent roles with the State Department, including director of the Office of Iranian Affairs. ❖

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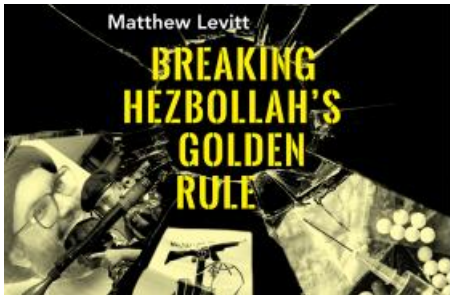
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