

‘Strategic Patience’ and Iran’s “Resistance Axis”: An Enduring Challenge for Biden's Administration

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Brief Analysis

Iran and the “Resistance Axis” are poised for another round of “strategic patience,” which, if ignored, will serve to the detriment of the United States, its allies and partners.

Though ideologues and apologists of the “Resistance Axis” may have wanted to deny it, many nevertheless implicitly accepted that the Trump Administration’s approach to Iran and its allies and proxies—the self-styled “Resistance Axis”—has been qualitatively different from that of prior U.S. administrations.

In public, by contrast, their quasi-unanimous stance has been that the current iteration of U.S. policy towards Iran is merely a boost of the previous formulae of sanctions, threats, and calls for surrender through negotiations. Accordingly, true to the record of nearly four decades, pro-Iranian media and government statements alike assert that the current U.S. drive will fail, even if its current intensity may inflict an elevated degree of harm.

Yet as the Biden administration prepares to take office, promising a substantially different approach to Iran, it is important to understand the ways in which this narrative departs from reality, and the ways in which navigating this narrative can help shape a new Iran policy without defaulting to the pre-Trump status quo.

Presentation versus Reality: The Iranian Characterization of the Trump Years

The Trump administration did not limit pressure on Iran to nuclear armament—an issue that Iran has leveraged to secure gains on separate strategic concerns. Nor did the administration attempt to induce a revolutionary regime change in Tehran, as the Bush 43 Administration was believed to pursue.

Expanding focus to Iran’s other activities helped prevent accidental accommodation of the use of terrorism by proxy to secure Iranian hegemony, to which the Obama Administration effectively acquiesced. Instead, through the conditions articulated by Secretary of State Pompeo, it has challenged the dual identity of Iran as state and revolution to shed the latter in favor of the former, adhere to the world order, and reap benefits.

While ‘reasonable,’ the Pompeo demands towards Iran, when spelled out, were not realistic. They effectively summoned the Revolution to voluntarily liquidate at a moment when it was decisively the dominant force in the Iranian conjoint political entity. Yet the “extreme pressure” applied by the Trump Administration on Tehran and its elimination of Soleimani, combined with regional developments—in particular the normalization of relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and others—shifted the Iranian attitude towards “compromise,” sincere or otherwise.

Second, the Trump administration’s policy towards Iran has been unabashedly unilateral. Sanctions have directly and—through compliant international actors like China—indirectly denied Iran the previously successful means to obfuscate and subvert the purposes of sanctions, when administered multilaterally, by subjecting them to the intricacies and constraints of the international system.

More importantly, the Trump administration proved that unilateral actions, when undertaken by an economic and military superpower, can be as effective as any concerted international regimen. The Trump administration has taken full advantage of the primary importance of relations with Washington at all levels across the world community of both state and corporation stakeholders.

The Trump administration has also forgone the self-handicap often adopted by liberal democracies in confronting rogue regimes—with the former bound by rules and considerations flauntingly ignored by the latter. Though this may have translated into hardship for the Iranian population, the Trump Administration adopted basic measures for humanitarian support while refusing to succumb to Tehran’s use of its own population as hostage towards securing relief.

Most dramatically, in January the Trump Administration engaged in the unabashed targeted assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the “Quds Force” foreign expeditionary division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Soleimani was a towering figure second only to the Supreme Leader in Iran’s Islamic Republic. While the assassination was internally provided a U.S. legal rationale, it irrefutably departed from international norms. The strike was further conducted on Iraqi soil, embarrassing the Iraqi government, and disrupting the dynamics of protests favored by the United States. Though ‘Resistance Axis’ media may have characterized it otherwise, the message to Iranian leadership was clear: Washington under the Trump administration will pursue its intents single-mindedly and unbound.

The Trump Administration in the Iranian ‘Strategic Patience’ Narrative

So far, the “Resistance Axis’s” framing of these Trump-era policies towards Iran is that of temporary efforts that will fail once they are revoked by the next administration. Depending on the steps it takes, the new administration can either build on these developments in a more careful way or risk returning to the earlier status quo.

Apologists for Iran have framed the severe economic setbacks it suffered as a result of the Trump policy as another stoic chapter in the endurance of the Islamic Revolution and in the determination of the Iranian people to sacrifice for its continuation. The assertions may have been in total dissonance with realities on the ground—where Iranians were severely punished for expressing their discontent or their desire for normalcy and openness—but Iranian messaging both at home and in areas of Iranian influence have maintained narrative dominance.

This was achieved primarily through the manipulation of the portrayal of events. For instance, the Iranian response to the killing of Soleimani—a limited symbolic bombardment of U.S. facilities in Iraq—was categorized as an overwhelming paradigm shift establishing strategic parity. This effort was supplemented, upgraded, and enhanced by the direct exploitation of the repeated verbal blunders and policy oscillations exhibited by President Trump himself—cast not as an oddity in U.S. politics, but as the archetype of the American decision-maker, without the masks of civility and reason that other politicians may brandish.

The pro-Iranian media effort has gleefully presented a windfall of vignettes supporting its claims to its readers and viewers: the disregard for the Iraqi protests, and more so the sudden abandonment of Syrian Kurdish fighters to a fate controlled by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Trump's repeated boasts of avidly and almost coercively securing funds from Gulf monarchies and his opining that the United States should have appropriated Iraqi oil fields, along with his claim that the residual U.S. presence in Syria is indeed for a similar purpose, have likewise helped this media build an image of haphazard and unreliable U.S. policy for their audience. So too with Trump's assertions that the Islamic State (ISIS) was created by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

Replayed in pro-Iranian media, these sound bites have impeccably reinforced to media consumers the overarching portrayal of the United States as malevolent, predatory, unreliable, exploitative, and erratic. Iran, on the other hand, is presented merely as the first among equals in a "West Asia" effort at resisting outside usurpation and interference. This longstanding policy of "strategic patience" has served it well since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Presumably, it will enable it, once more, to prevail. The results of the 2020 U.S. presidential elections affords Iran the opportunity to declare vindication, even while concerns over the "Trump Tunnel"—the remaining weeks of the Trump Administration in the course of which dramatic action may be undertaken—are high.

Navigating Narratives Towards a new U.S. Policy on Iran

The dominant pro-Iranian narrative will naturally have an impact on how any new Biden Iran policies are perceived by those who buy into the Iranian view of events. In pro-Iranian media, it is Washington that consistently seeks to negotiate, suspiciously, and it is Tehran that rebuffs. Tucked within such statements are assertions that Iran is certainly ready for a true dialogue, provided that just conditions are met: namely that Washington rejoins the JCPOA. Through a soft landing in discourse away from martial proclamations, Iran is set to claim either a consistent adherence to the international order, the putative success of its strategic patience approach, or both.

Meanwhile, the media sphere of Iran apologists propagate two propositions: that the forthcoming Biden administration will be weak, consumed by domestic concerns and confused for months about a coherent policy towards Iran and the Middle East. Alternatively, by recruiting for senior positions political figures from the Obama Administration closely involved in crafting and negotiating the JCPOA, President-Elect Joe Biden has already set the course towards reverting to the more accommodating approach of Obama.

The forthcoming Biden administration can be expected to sharply depart from Trump's unilateralism and loosened rules of engagement. Yet even ardent supporters of the JCPOA would recognize that while Iran adhered to its requirements, it was not induced to moderate itself on other issues of concern—technical, such as ballistic missiles, or strategic, such as regional hegemonic pursuits. In fact, it may be disingenuous not to recognize that Tehran leveraged the JCPOA to expand its influence.

Irrespective of any assessment of the course the Biden administration may follow, come January 21st, 2021, public statements suggest that Iran will once again be set to reclaim the regional initiative—in Iraq, where it may upend Mustafa al-Kadhimi's position as prime minister, a compromise Iran had to condone; in Syria, where it can re-assert its field primacy and restore its eroded parity with Russia; in Lebanon, where it can coerce an international recognition of its suzerain status; and in Yemen, where it is set consolidate the rule of its allies, and its influence over them.

But if Iran finds a new administration that is not willing to accept these efforts unchallenged, it may seek to exchange the United States' recommitment to the JCPOA for a truce, rhetorical and kinetic, on other regional fronts. It may allow the unfolding of a regional process of normalization with Israel, for example. Many ideologues aligned with Tehran already label this process as bound to fail, and even to unravel the equilibrium that the Arab states involved may have accomplished with their own populations. On this issue, Iran may be set for another form of "strategic

patience” while maintaining multiple assets to induce motion in the direction to which its patience is attending.

The acrimonious and sometimes deliberately disruptive actions of the Trump administration notwithstanding, the Biden team can surely recognize that its policies have generated some corrective value that can be utilized. Returning to the JCPOA may be an indicated goal, provided that both the letter of the agreement and the “comprehensive” nature claimed in its title are indeed adhered to. The Iranian revolutionary designs in the region, and their subversion of affected states may be ignored only at the risk of future inflated resurgence of their destructive potential. Moreover, the opportunity is there to diffuse Iranian influence in its spheres of regional expansion regularly subjected to its narratives—notably Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen—based on the evolving situation in each country.

Iraq has its first next-generation Prime Minister. Kadhimi is driven by a visible patriotic impulse, untainted by corruption, and subscribes to a world-view compatible with U.S. values and interests. He faces the challenge of translating his vision and potential into a deliberate program supported by the electorate. Kadhimi does not call for U.S. intervention on his behalf, but he certainly needs a level playing field against Iranian manipulation, one that can be realized only with active U.S. engagement.

The Biden Administration ought to also recognize that the irretrievably corrupt kleptocratic political class in Lebanon has been enhanced and maintained by Iran’s local loyal ally, a seemingly less corrupt Hezbollah. It should avoid the temptation of elevating the latter to the status of an antidote to the country’s ongoing political collapse. Both ideologically and practically speaking, Hezbollah’s continued dominance of Lebanon spells the further destruction of Lebanon as a country. Just as the U.S. Government, under the current and previous administrations, has incrementally identified and sanctioned the destructive role of Hezbollah both at home and abroad, the Biden Administration should follow course.

In Yemen, the Biden team may be justified in addressing the Saudi conduct of war. Yet coordination with Saudi Arabia is imperative to restore balance within Yemeni society, and even within the influential Zaydi community that has been largely abandoned to Iranian influence.

In Syria, the forthcoming Administration faces the burden of correcting mistakes, neglect, and lack of a comprehensive vision committed by the two previous administrations. Continuing on a similar course is a mistake: the rise of ISIS and terrorism, a wave of migration to Europe and ensuing far right reaction over the past decade all clearly indicate that this seemingly localized conflict will continue to have global repercussions. To address this ongoing conflict, the United States will have to graduate from its current limited ability of merely interdicting Russian designs to assuming a more coherent and present role in shaping the course of a post-war Syria. The Biden Administration may have more urgent issues to attend to, but Syria is a test for U.S. leadership, values, and interests.

The Biden administration is indeed equipped to engage in a more careful way with all of these dossiers, along with the still relevant Palestinian question. When faced with how the administration allocates its human and material resources to address a world in crisis, it may choose to delay the question of Iran and the U.S. role in the Middle East. It is important to remember, however, that Iran and the “Resistance Axis” are poised for another round of “strategic patience,” which, if ignored, will serve to the detriment of the United States, its allies and partners. ❖

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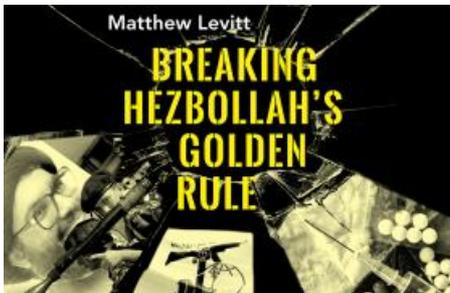
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