

Deterring Iran in the Gray Zone

Insights from Four Decades of Conflict

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The United States has repeatedly failed to understand the unique requirements of gray zone deterrence. A U.S. strategy would not only facilitate more successful diplomacy with Tehran but also enhance efforts to counter other actors such as China and Russia.

The early months of the Biden administration have seen renewed hopes for nuclear diplomacy, counterbalanced by renewed Iranian proxy attacks against U.S. interests. So begins the latest chapter in a four-decade relationship characterized by largely unsuccessful U.S. attempts to deter Iran's gray zone activities—despite vast American military advantages. Since the 1980s, the United States has repeatedly failed to understand the often unique requirements of gray zone deterrence. The current moment, with its risks and opportunities, calls for Washington to draw the right lessons from the past and adopt its own gray zone deterrence strategy to meet the challenges posed by the Islamic Republic.

In this Policy Note, building on his January 2020 publication *[Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-war)* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-war>), military expert Michael Eisenstadt offers a primer on gray zone deterrence, incorporating insights from past decades as well as Tehran's recent efforts to counter the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy. He argues that such a strategy will not only facilitate more successful diplomacy with Tehran but also enhance efforts to counter other gray zone actors such as China and Russia. ❖

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