

The Ends of Iran: Next Steps for Tehran and Its Neighbors

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May 30, 2019

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Ambassador Barbara A. Leaf was the Ruth and Sid Lapidus Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Geduld Program on Arab Politics from 2018-2021.



Brief Analysis

The former head of U.S. naval operations in the Gulf joins two military and diplomatic experts for a discussion on Iran's strategic calculus, allied perspectives, and Washington's policy options.

On May 24, Michael Eisenstadt, John Miller, and Barbara Leaf addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Eisenstadt is the Institute's Kahn Fellow and director of its Military and Security Studies Program. Miller is a retired vice admiral who formerly served as head of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. Leaf is a senior fellow at the Institute and former ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Iran's image of the United States is rather easy to discern through the regime's public messaging, most notably that of the Supreme Leader. In contrast, the regime's threat perception of the United States is more difficult to discern. In this context, the statements of Iranian officials can sometimes be misleading, and opinions within Iran's system on the matter are not monolithic.

On Iran's image of the United States, the leadership contends that the United States is a dangerous, implacable, and entirely untrustworthy enemy. This perception is derived from a belief that the United States has been out to get the Islamic Republic since its inception. For instance, Tehran claims that Iraq invaded post-revolution Iran only after the United States gave it the "go-ahead," when in fact Washington tried to warn the regime in advance about Baghdad's war plans only to be spurned. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic alleges that the United States has been engaged in soft war efforts to overthrow the regime, pointing to the Green Movement in 2009; yet that movement was purely domestic in nature, and the Obama administration limited itself to making mild, belated comments about human rights abuses at the time. More recently, Iran has pointed to U.S. withdrawal from and subsequent undermining of the nuclear deal as a prime example of its dishonesty.

In recent weeks, the potential for inadvertent escalation has garnered much attention. Under the current circumstances, however, escalation resulting in war is unlikely. After all, many hundreds of Americans have been killed in the last forty years due to Iran's direct or proxy actions, while Israel has killed around 100-150 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel in Syria over the past two years in order to thwart Tehran's attempts to establish an offensive base of operations there. Neither of these developments has brought the two sides to a war.

At the same time, historical aversion to a direct clash does not preclude the possibility that hardline voices within Iran's security establishment might succeed in rallying others to hit back against the United States. These actors could conceivably try to replicate incidents like the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in an effort to expel America from the region for good.

In recent years, Iran has demonstrated that it does not want its proxies to drag it into an undesired conflict with the United States. For instance, in 2006, Hezbollah attempted to seize Israeli soldiers for purposes of a prisoner swap, resulting in a costly war that led to the destruction of the group's heavy missile force, a key part of Iran's strategic deterrent. As a result, Tehran imposed greater controls over Hezbollah's actions. Similarly, since 2014, Iran's proxies in Iraq have decided against confronting the United States, despite stating that they would resume their resistance to the "occupation" if U.S. forces returned. Both of these episodes suggest that Tehran has learned it must enforce discipline on its proxies, and it has succeeded in doing so, at least so far.

JOHN MILLER

In light of Iran's nefarious activities throughout the region, the U.S. administration's maximum pressure campaign does have some merit. Yet Washington must also be clear about its end goal and provide the Iranians with an avenue to moderate their behavior.

Tensions are high right now as a result of that campaign, but they have been high before. Some point to the deployment of a carrier strike group as evidence of unusual escalation, but the United States has almost always had an aircraft carrier deployed in the region for the past decade. Generally, the two sides have been successful at managing tensions to avoid escalation, and such precedents are reassuring. Yet the United States has not been successful in establishing secure and sustainable lines of communication with the Iranians. Today, these channels are disturbingly weak, both diplomatically and with Iranian military commanders.

Washington should not be tempted to dismiss the threat posed by Iran. Despite enduring sanctions at varying degrees for the last forty years, the regime has been very successful at steadily building up its military capabilities. Its maritime capabilities are especially significant, since Iran effectively patrols the Strait of Hormuz. Every foreign ship, whether commercial or military, passes by IRGC vessels while sailing through the Persian Gulf. Sometimes, IRGC warships approach those of the United States in seemingly hostile fashion. These contacts between can result in miscalculation when military commanders must decide how to react, and the lack of effective communication channels would make it difficult to deescalate effectively.

The prospect of a large-scale conflict is unlikely given both sides' aversion to escalation. However, the Iranians might plausibly increase their asymmetric activity since it is difficult to attribute such actions to Tehran.

BARBARA LEAF

Detering an adversary requires a few key ingredients: understanding the enemy's intent, offering clear strategic messaging about one's own intentions, communicating transgressions, and demonstrating that military force can be quickly mobilized in response to such transgressions. Washington's current lack of understanding about Iran's intentions stems from the regime's opaque political system and its approach to confrontation with the United States. In addition, the two governments have virtually no direct communication, instead messaging each other through public statements, demonstrations of military force, and, at times, covert action.

Although the Supreme Leader has reiterated his aversion to engaging in escalation that leads to war, Iran could ultimately decide that there are no real redlines limiting its military action. Moving forward, the regime will likely continue its current approach: that is, painting the United States as the instigator of tension, pressuring Europe to undermine Washington's stance, attempting to show that the Trump administration is all bark and no bite, and rallying anti-American sentiment domestically.

Iraq is the most sensitive backdrop for U.S.-Iran tensions. Tehran can mobilize several dozen militias there that have resisted Iraqi government control, so it will likely test U.S. resolve periodically. As for the Gulf states, with the exception of a few editorials calling for surgical strikes on Iran, reactions to the recent sabotage attacks in Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been very cautious, even muted. The Saudis have called for an emergency summit, while the UAE has neglected to identify suspects in the Fujairah ship attacks.

This summary was prepared by Arjan Ganji.

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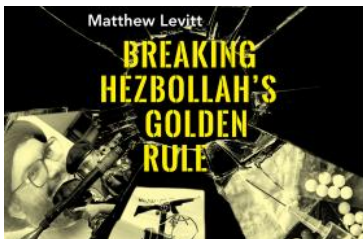
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