

The Narrow Path to a New Middle East: A Regional Order to Contain Iran for Good

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Contrary to decades of conventional thinking, it turned out that an exceptional military campaign could damage the regime's regional standing—but now the United States must lead a similarly extraordinary civilian effort to make that change permanent.

The Iranian regime is on its back foot, more vulnerable internally and exposed abroad than at any point since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Before Hamas's October 7 attack and Israel's subsequent multipronged war on Iranian interests, Tehran's huge investments in its missile arsenal, nuclear weapons program, and network of regional proxy actors had sharply constrained U.S. strategy toward the Middle East. Analysts remained divided on just what mix of tools would effectively deter Iranian aggression, but they generally agreed that if Tehran were pushed too hard, it would retain a menu of retaliatory options that risked full-scale war. Four successive presidents—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump in his first term, and Joe Biden—all settled on using diplomacy and sanctions for deterrence and never authorized military strikes inside Iranian territory. But Israel's operational successes have shattered those preconceptions and opened a window of opportunity to finish dismantling Iran's regional threat network and build a safer and more stable Middle East. The stage is set for a new political framework that can reform and strengthen the corrupt and weak bureaucracies that Iran fed on and replace compromised leaders susceptible to Iranian influence...

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