

Sanctions May Lead to Regime Change in Iran, but What Then?

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Brief Analysis

The continually escalating war of words between Iran and the United States suggests that the Middle East will have much at stake in the coming months as sanctions take effect. The U.S. administration has made repeated assertions that “regime change” and “military action” against Iran are not on the agenda. Instead, the administration has stated that the goal is to change the behavior, not the regime.

Nevertheless, the Iranian regime certainly appears to be under threat. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s [assertion \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/22/politics/pompeo-iran-speech-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/22/politics/pompeo-iran-speech-intl/index.html) that “to the regime, prosperity, security, and freedom for the Iranian people are acceptable casualties in the march to fulfill the Revolution” and Trump’s own tweets on the subject hint at an interest to dismantle the Iranian state entirely. Most recently, Trump has in fact [suggested \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-31/trump-says-iranian-regime-may-collapse-because-of-his-policies\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-31/trump-says-iranian-regime-may-collapse-because-of-his-policies) that the regime may collapse due to U.S. sanctions policy. Although these statements came as a response to the Iranian regime’s own inflammatory remarks, they are nonetheless revealing. August’s widespread protests have only intensified the sense that regime change is on the table, and regionally, American rhetoric has led many to wonder how far the United States would be willing to go to change Iran.

The Iranian regime is repressive and expansionary. Certainly, a change in its more belligerent policies, including its support of proxy militias and ballistic missile program, would benefit regional stability and contribute to the safety of many across the Middle East. But if the United States is hoping to alter Iran’s behavior by destabilizing the state itself, it may find itself doing more harm than good.

The United States’ foreign policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, and even the Soviet Union indicates that Washington relies on one of two strategies when attempting to ‘change behavior’: Containment or Regime Change. Containment requires patience and resilience; it is not a strategy that promises a quick or easy victory. As introduced during the Cold War, Containment represents a middle-ground position between détente and rollback. However, despite its stated goals, the current sanctions policy does not appear to be designed for containment. Rather, by pulling out of the nuclear deal with Iran, Trump has rejected the chance to contain Teheran, and this month’s implementation of sanctions suggests that the repercussions are more likely to generate an increase in regional instability than a shift

in Iran's behavior.

Containment as a geopolitical strategy for halting Iranian expansion requires a commitment to a firm, long-term policy and some sort of international consensus on the goals for actions against Iran. Yet, the withdrawal from the nuclear deal has created a rift in the transatlantic relationship, and it seems that Western nations diverge in their understandings of how Iran ought to act. In addition, Containment calls for a certain level of engagement with the adversary, which neither President Trump nor Iran appears interested in. Lastly, the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the United States' broader regional goals makes it difficult for the Iranian regime to understand or comply with U.S. interests.

As it is shaping up, the sanctions policy appears to be designed to change Iran's behavior through a change in regime. By weakening the regime through sanctions and other forms of pressure, this strategy is already inducing an economic crisis that might provoke the Iranian people to overthrow their leaders. While Iran's positive political transformation may be a worthy goal, the actual execution of this strategy could easily backfire: by holding the Iranian people hostage to their government's actions, the Trump administration risks bolstering the regime's.

It is important to remember that Iran still has some outlets for economic trade, which may be expanded due to the competition between the United States and other nations—namely China and Russia. Ayatollah Khamenei appears to have given up relying on Europe to salvage the JCPOA, but China and Russia remain accessible markets. China alone purchases 655,000 barrels a day from Iran, a number that accounts for 60 percent of Iran's oil exports. In light of the trade war between the United States and China, it is unlikely that Beijing will feel inclined to support the United States's efforts to put pressure on Iran. In fact, as the trade war continues, China may choose to retaliate by attempting to boost the Iranian economy. On its part, Russia also does not appear particularly interested in pressuring Iran, especially given the two states' overlapping interests in Syria.

Putting the specifics of the Iranian case aside, general research on sanctions reveals that the rate of success in longstanding behavioral regime change is low. Iraq, for example, provides plenty of evidence for the limits and potential outcomes of sanctions against authoritarian regimes: After thirteen years of sanctions that weakened Iraq but failed to change its behavior, the United States ultimately chose military intervention to bring about the behavioral changes that the sanctions were purportedly designed to produce. Consequently, the high probability that sanctions will fail to fundamentally alter Iran's behavior may make military intervention increasingly attractive to the Trump administration, especially if Iran proceeds with the efforts to expand its influence in the region.

Yet, if the United States tries to remove the Iranian regime by force rather than promote gradual reform, the outcome would be little different from the upheaval of the Arab Spring: a surge of revolution followed by a quick return to extant state structures, especially the military. Moreover, Iran's past war demonstrate that when Iranian leadership feels threatened, it fights back with gusto. Iran has already responded to sanctions by repeatedly threatening to close the strait of Hormuz, and there is no indication that it would alter its behavior. Of more serious concern are the continuing regional spread of Iranian proxies, whose presence poses a threat to American troops and their allies throughout the Middle East, and Iran's nuclear program, which the JCPOA was originally designed to stop.

Indeed, despite the appeal of a 'decisive fix' in the form of a regime change, the Trump administration must remember that this strategy often backfires, intensifying the behavior it was designed to stop rather than putting an end to it. The United States has a long history with regime change. But while the costs of this tactic have varied, one outcome that has repeated itself over and over again is chaos. The strategy of a regime change is only effective if the toppled regime is replaced by a government friendly to the United States. However, the United States' attempts to bolster friendly governments in the region has resulted in failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan and generated instabilities that allowed terrorist groups to thrive. If faced with the decision, President Trump should understand that the United States cannot afford another war in the Middle East.

All of this is not to say that the United States should give Iran free rein to act as it chooses. Rather, instead of trying to bring a regime change about, Washington should try to reduce the level of risk Iran poses by focusing on narrower goals, such as destabilizing Iranian initiatives, limiting Iranian malign activities, and intercepting any Iranian arms shipments to Iran's proxies. ❖

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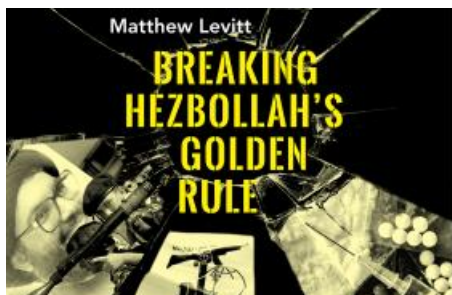
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