

Confronting the Full Range of Iranian Threats

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Oct 11, 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

In practical terms, scrapping and replacing the JCPOA is a nonstarter, so the administration should instead focus on countering Iran as its top regional priority -- and decide how it will respond when Tehran pushes back.

In negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for the Iran nuclear file, the United States bet implicitly on that diplomatic approach not only as a means to temporarily constrain Iran's nuclear weapons program, but also as a way to engender a transformation of Iran from an anti-status quo, in some respects revolutionary Islamic movement, into a "stakeholder" in regional security. As the JCPOA Preface states, "full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security."

The reality in the region since summer 2015, when those words were agreed, could not be more at odds with that hope. Iran, after indirectly promoting the Islamic State (IS) by empowering anti-Sunni Arab policies by its allies Prime Minister Maliki in Iraq and President Assad in Syria, forged an alliance that brought major Russian military forces into the region, and with them accelerated a genocidal campaign that has cost almost half a million deaths, to end the Syrian civil war on Assad's maximalist terms -- a campaign symbolized by the carpet bombing of Aleppo. Tehran has also been intervening ever more in Yemen, arming both the Houthis there and Hezbollah in Lebanon with offensive missile systems that threaten respectively the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Israeli homeland.

Consequently, every friendly Middle Eastern leader I have spoken to in the past twenty-four months has emphasized that Iran, not IS or al-Qaeda, is the major security threat to the region. Apart from the JCPOA, the last administration did little to counter it. The Trump administration has taken a more active position, at least rhetorically. During his May meetings with Arab leaders in Riyadh, President Trump signed up to the Riyadh Communique, which accused Iran of "malign interference," branded its activities as "terrorist," and committed signatories to act collectively against it. The president heard similar messages from the leaders of Turkey and Israel. At this point the president appears to be on board with many of his senior advisors in taking a tougher stance against Tehran's destabilizing

regional activities.

Nevertheless, while a new presidential policy on Iran is about to be announced, it is not yet clear whether the United States is ready to deal with all the implications of a serious containment policy against a foe that has seen nothing but success in recent years, executing a carefully thought out and resourced regional strategy. The United States has to have an equally thoughtful, resourced response. Any such response must focus on a set of issues about the "hows" and "whys" of containment strategy.

DETERMINING THE MISSION AND MAKING IT FIRST PRIORITY

To succeed with any policy toward Iran, the United States must set clear final goals. Does it merely want to push back on Tehran's regional aggression, as it did with Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s? Or does it seek a long-term containment policy to effect fundamental policy changes in Iran (i.e., George Kennan's initial prescription for the Cold War), or even regime change? If so, how would this policy be carried out in practice? Iran experts in the United States are divided on whether toppling the regime or continuing Obama's policy of outreach is the best way to transform Iran; Washington's potential international allies are split on this issue as well.

In view of the need for as broad an international coalition as possible, I recommend the mission be limited to containing Iran's efforts to expand its illegitimate influence in other countries, with emphasis on its military and paramilitary initiatives. Clarity in explaining whatever mission the United States opts for is essential if the administration wants to maximize its chances of winning adherents at home and abroad.

To succeed, any containment plan against Iran must also be the first U.S. priority in the region short of aborting terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Specifically, U.S. military and diplomatic resources beginning now should be prioritized away from IS and toward Iran.

THE JCPOA

Since taking office, the president has been ever more critical about the JCPOA. He is now required to recertify a series of questions related to the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015, and he has indicated he will not certify. Regardless of what he decides, this certification process does not directly impact the agreement or U.S. commitments within it, but the logic of the INARA and any presidential refusal to certify is to question whether the United States should continue adhering to the agreement, pull out of it, or attempt to negotiate a better one.

It is easy to visualize a "better" JCPOA -- it would include longer time periods; increased access for the International Atomic Energy Agency to more easily inspect all suspect sites in Iran, including military; more clarity on the "possible military dimensions" of the Iranian program; and inclusion of certain missile systems and research. Yet Iran's repeated refusals to negotiate a new agreement, and the reluctance of other key international partners, especially the P5+1 states, to entertain new negotiations, strongly argue for a limited U.S. effort to place the agreement under greater scrutiny and possible later additional negotiations. The short-term goals should include stripping the agreement of its psychological value as a "seal of good approval" for a state that has not deserved it, and undercutting the international business community's willingness to fund Iran's economy, which will inevitably increase its power-projection capabilities to the detriment of regional security.

The United States must be careful not to overpromise the American people or Congress on what it can accomplish by calling into question the agreement. Short of war, obtaining a fundamentally new agreement (i.e., one in which Iran forswears all enrichment activities) would require international sanctions far greater than those in the period 2010-2015. And those sanctions, especially the most effective ones -- the Iranian oil import sanctions under the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act -- were controversial with America's European allies and Asian trading partners

at the time, despite clear Iranian violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, inflammatory rhetoric by then President Ahmadinejad, and a real risk of war in the Gulf over the Iranian program involving either Israel or the United States. None of those conditions are present today, and thus the burden of proof to advocate such an approach is extraordinarily high. Any U.S. effort to call Iran to account for the gamut of its activities requires an international community united on Iran, and a too-aggressive U.S. campaign against the JCPOA would undermine this unity.

WHO IS THE ENEMY?

Some of America's partners in the region see Iran not only as a state, but as a "malign" Shia movement in a largely Sunni Middle East. But the more that this formulation is adopted, the more absolute the contest becomes, with less potential "give" from Iran (which cannot simply surrender its religious essence) and growing reluctance among allies.

Some regional states such as Israel, Turkey, and Egypt see Iran as a threat, but in traditional, not religious, terms. For example, President Erdogan of Turkey has repeatedly referred to "Persian expansionism," suggesting that Ankara would prefer traditional Cold War-style containment. The Europeans are even less enchanted with casting the conflict in religious terms; in fact, some of them see "medieval" Saudi Arabia as a bigger problem than President Rouhani's "modernist" Iran. To maximize common international policy ground amid these widely variant threat perceptions, the Trump administration should focus on Iran as a national state to be contained and deterred, not a cause to be destroyed.

DEALING WITH IRAN IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Although Iran is challenging regional security from Yemen to Afghanistan, the key front is Syria and Iraq, the core of the Levantine Middle East, where Tehran has long influenced Bashar al-Assad's regime and the Shia-centric government in Baghdad, respectively. Following the 2011 "Arab Spring," Iranian leaders pushed these surrogates to exert greater control, but such efforts also exacerbated the catastrophic developments unfolding in each country: namely, the mass uprising against Assad and the emergence of IS.

Iran has since undertaken an all-out campaign to keep Assad in power and expand its influence in Iraq -- aided, ironically, by the U.S.-led war against IS. As IS forces are ground down in their last redoubts, Tehran's surrogates are scurrying to establish a land corridor between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The geostrategic shift this portends is extraordinary. As the Bipartisan Policy Center recently pointed out, this could leave 20 million Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq under de facto Shia rule, likely incubating a new Sunni extremist movement to replace IS.

Such a corridor is destabilizing for other reasons as well. The United States and its allies have established footholds in northern Syria, along the Jordanian border, and in Iraq, primarily to fight IS. Once the group is defeated, these positions will either have to be abandoned or held against inevitable Iranian-orchestrated political, terrorist, even military attacks intended to push U.S. forces out. Remaining in Syria indefinitely would require complicated political arrangements with Turkey, Jordan, Baghdad, and various Kurdish and Sunni Arab factions -- and with Russia as well.

The United States must convince the international community, the Russians, and, indirectly, Iran that the internal constitution of Iraq and Syria and the presence of foreign forces (including Iranian, Iranian surrogate, and Russian) on their territory is a major security concern for the United States -- not just because it stirs up Sunni extremist movements like IS, but also because it poses an existential threat for our allies and partners, beginning with Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Washington must therefore recognize the stakes: if it does not stop the Iranians on this front, they will soon emerge as the dominant force in the region, deeply inimical to the United States and its partners, and allied with Putin's Russia.

To that end U.S. forces should remain in a train-and-equip capacity in Iraq, as well as in Syria. The ostensible purpose of the latter presence is to protect enclaves and U.S. partners from a resurgence of terrorism, but it would also implicitly put military pressure on Damascus and Iran to negotiate seriously in the Geneva process regarding Syria's future political situation, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

RESPONDING WHEN IRAN STRIKES BACK

If history is a guide, any U.S. effort to confront Tehran will generate attacks on U.S. interests. Since 1979, the regime has struck at U.S. targets directly or through surrogates on multiple occasions, from Kuwait, Lebanon, and Yemen to a thwarted plot in Georgetown. Two examples are particularly relevant: the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, which killed nineteen American servicemen, and the summer 2011 spurt of targeted killings that took the lives of another sixteen soldiers in Iraq.

In response, Washington has either eschewed obvious retaliation or taken action against surrogates outside Iran with mixed results. U.S. officials need to determine in advance how they will react if Iran pushes back against U.S. containment efforts, and in particular if Washington will continue the policy of not striking back at Iran directly.

COMMUNICATING WITH TEHRAN

Technical communications with Iran remain limited (e.g., between forces in the Persian Gulf). But Washington needs to consider whether -- and if so, under what conditions and for what purpose -- it should communicate "politically" with Iran, bearing in mind that the Bush administration did so in Iraq. It would also need to decide with whom to communicate: Foreign Minister Zarif, or the shadowy Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who is largely responsible for carrying out Iran's regional policies? Would such contacts be open or secret, as they were initially with the Obama administration? Would they be brokered by a third party, and if so, who? Would Iran even be willing to engage in such dialogue, and at what price? Finally, what end would these talks serve?

However the administration answers these questions, it must ensure that its overall goals and specific intentions are made known in some way to the Iranian leadership. The risk of misunderstanding and resulting escalation will remain high in U.S.-Iranian relations.

KEEPING THE ANTI-IRAN ALLIANCE STRONG

The military, economic, and diplomatic power of any anti-Iran alliance among the United States, European allies, and most of the Middle East is extraordinary, and far greater than Iran's capabilities, even including Russian military forces in the region. But this power is more potential than real, so Washington should prioritize strengthening it, tailoring U.S. responses to Iranian actions in order to maximize their potential. With European allies and international organizations, particularly the UN, this means clarity on what the United States wants to achieve with Iran, and a certain respect for international agreements and protocols that are taken much more seriously outside than inside the United States. With regional partners, the main risk is diversion of effort into internecine spats. The Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian political campaign against Qatar, Iraqi Kurdistan leader Masoud Barzani's push for independence, and the dispute between the United States and Turkey over the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) are examples of such disunity and disagreements.

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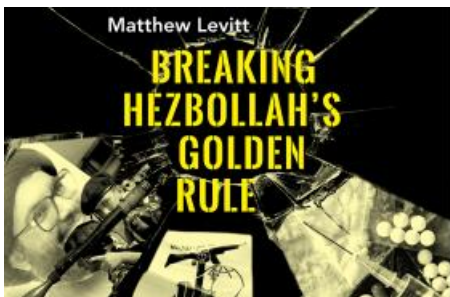
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