

# Beyond the Vote (Part 3): Implications for Regional Security

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Sep 21, 2015

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [David Petraeus \(/experts/david-petraeus\)](/experts/david-petraeus)

Gen. David H. Petraeus, who retired from the Army in 2011 after commanding U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, served as director of the CIA from September 2011 to November 2012.



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Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Brief Analysis

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**A former U.S. Army commander and a distinguished diplomat discuss how the nuclear deal could compromise longstanding U.S. interests in the Middle East if Washington does not do a better job of countering Iran's destabilizing ambitions.**

*On September 16, The Washington Institute held a special one-day conference on the ramifications of the Iran nuclear agreement. The following is a rapporteur's summary of remarks by former CIA director Gen. David Petraeus (Ret.) and James Jeffrey, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. [Read summaries of other panels or watch video of the forum. \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-vote-implications-of-the-iran-nuclear-agreement\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-vote-implications-of-the-iran-nuclear-agreement)*

DAVID PETRAEUS

Although it is far too soon to assess the nuclear deal's impact on the Middle East, it may prove to be a watershed moment for the region, in terms of both Iran and America's role there. It is reasonable to suggest that the deal will increase the resources available to the regime over time -- meaning more money and weapons to escalate its destabilizing regional activities if it so chooses, in part through clients and proxies such as Hezbollah, the Assad regime, Hamas, Yemen's Houthis, and various Shiite militias in Iraq. More broadly, the deal could accelerate the imbalance of power between Iran and its Sunni Arab rivals.

The key question is what the future holds for the relationship between a more powerful Iran and the United States.

Will Washington double down with its allies and partners to balance Iran, or will it look to accommodate or even cooperate with the regime? The answer depends on Tehran's behavior. The general consensus in the region is that the United States will take the path of accommodation out of fear that the nuclear deal might fall apart.

Yet Washington needs to take steps to counter Iran's malign influence. One way to do so is by demonstrably showing that while there may be new dynamics at play in the region (e.g., a greater Saudi inclination to action), the theater is still set, so to speak. Beyond that, the United States needs to reassure its regional allies by providing them with various military hardware, continued training, and other sought-after security assistance. It must also make an ironclad statement that Iran will not be allowed to enrich nuclear fuel to weapons-grade levels, and that action will be taken if necessary. This can help prevent allies from seeking their own nuclear programs. Yet the true credibility of potential countervailing measures will be established by U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq, Washington now has an extraordinary opportunity to support Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as he works on serious reforms. With citizens unhappy over the lack of basic services, and with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's Friday sermons amplifying extensive corruption, the need for change has become more urgent. Thus far, Abadi has eliminated the role of the vice presidents and several ministries, begun examining the chief justice, and launched investigations into numerous government, military, and police officials who were overseeing Mosul when the city collapsed. Needless to say, these reforms are being contested by Iranian-supported Shiite militias, including Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Corps. Winning in Iraq requires inclusive politics and support for the prime minister in order to allow another Sunni "Awakening."

In Syria, credible Sunni ground forces are the key to defeating the "Islamic State"/ISIS and changing the momentum on the battlefield. This in turn could create the context for a negotiated settlement.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, the United States needs to work with regional powers to stop arms shipments to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. This approach is already supported by Egypt's efforts to destroy the tunnels leading from Sinai to Gaza. The message needs to be clear not only to Iran, but also to America's allies in the region.

It should be noted that if Iran's actions, intentions, and behaviors evolve to the point where it becomes a status quo power and does not seek to expedite its revolution, then bilateral cooperation with the United States could be possible. In the meantime, there will be points where their interests converge, though Washington must still be wary. For example, they currently share an interest in defeating ISIS, yet the prospect of providing direct air support to Iranian-supported Shiite militias is not in America's best interests.

The nuclear deal is sustainable unless Tehran decides to take clear action to unravel it. The more troublesome issue is the sustainability of regional stability -- some areas (e.g., the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Jordan) are relatively stable, but the key is to ensure that the Middle East does not spiral further into a geopolitical Chernobyl. The United States needs to actively prevent aggressive Iranian adventurism from further roiling specific areas of concern.

## **JAMES JEFFREY**

**A**bsent an Iranian rush to get a nuclear weapon, the most important consequence of the deal will be its effect on U.S. security interests -- not only in the Persian Gulf area, but also throughout the wider region stretching from Pakistan to Afghanistan to North Africa. Iran still has expectations to become a regional hegemon. This is highlighted in Professor Hossein Mousavian's writings on Iran's regional goals: first, to drive America out, second, to weaken Israel, and third, to establish an Iranian condominium in the Gulf and beyond. Mousavian's supposedly "moderate" view is a common one in Iran.

Absent countervailing force, Iran will look to expand its influence. If the United States hopes to carry out its traditional function in the world since the 1940s, it must be the one to provide this countervailing force. This is

integral to ensure that Iran does not expand its regional power, and also to avoid endorsing or being dragged into a Sunni-Shiite cataclysm -- a route that ISIS and some Iranian-supported Iraqi Shiites want or are willing to contemplate. If Washington is unwilling to challenge Iran because it could undermine the nuclear deal, then Tehran will make significant advances in the region.

The United States also needs to reassure its allies. There is no denying that Washington has the capability, but questions persist about its intentions. This disconnect was highlighted by the U.S.-hosted Gulf summit in May -- not only did four of the six GCC heads of state fail to show up, but a majority of the discussion appears to have been about hardware and what Washington wanted from these states. This is problematic because the visiting officials had sought broader reassurances -- perhaps an unequivocal statement along the lines of "This shall not stand, the United States will not allow Iran to gain any power via diplomatic, military, terrorist, or other activities in the region."

In Syria, a new development has emerged with the arrival of Russian forces to directly assist the Assad regime. Although there is little military significance to a few Russian tanks in the Middle East, it is a political statement by Moscow to which the United States must respond. Washington needs to be emitting strong warnings -- for example, a statement that any Russian interference with any U.S. operations in Syria will not be tolerated and may lead to a response.

In Iraq, the possibility of cooperation with Iran is front and center. A prime example of successful cooperation is Kurdistan, which remains a part of Iraq largely because Turkey, the United States, and Iran all have interests in preventing it from becoming a statelet. Yet Iran continues to be a detriment wherever interests differ. Prime Minister Abadi is taking heroic steps supported by a large number of Shiites, including other political groups and individuals such as Ayatollah Sistani, and yet the Iranians and their local supporters continue to stand in the way of meaningful change. As long as Tehran fuels the sectarian divide, further cooperation will not occur, even if it may be in Iran's best interests.

Other opportunities for U.S.-Iranian cooperation, coordination, or communication exist in places such as Afghanistan, where the situation is not quite as dramatic as in Iraq. In theory, setting up a line of communication in order to deconflict military operations within the Gulf could be constructive for both sides. Yet if the United States restrains its policies in the Middle East due to fears of upsetting Iran or undermining the nuclear deal, then regional security will surely suffer.

*This summary was prepared by Omar Mukhlis. ❖*

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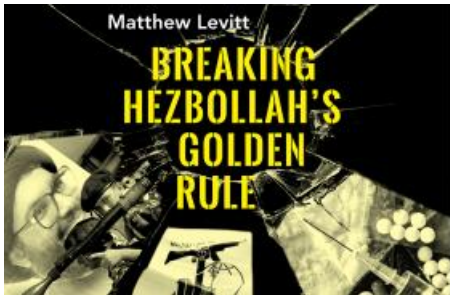


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