

THE CARAVAN

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ROLLING BACK IRAN



by **Charles Hill**

The matter of the Middle East is now critical to the fate of modern world order.

The end of the Cold War, now a quarter-century in the past, increasingly looks like the turning-point from which began a downward spiral toward the global disarray and dangers which swirl through this still-new twenty-first century. For a short time the international relations sector buzzed with the possibility of “A New World Order” which President George H. W. Bush tried to describe without success. The UN Security Council met for a couple of hours in January 1992 in its first-ever Heads of Government session, supposedly to authorize a revitalization of “the World Organization of its Member States” but that endeavor ended in a matter of months. This meant that unlike all major wars of the modern age, there was no generally-agreed settlement as there had been after the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II. The intelligentsia’s consensus was that the state, borders,

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and sovereignty were outmoded. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were the exciting new form. The European Union was reconceiving itself accordingly, relegating the Westphalian state system which Europe had created and given the world to the ash-heap of history, at least as Europe itself was concerned. The United States, weary from its Cold War exertions, envisioned a “peace dividend,” and elected a domestic-agenda-first president. America would bask in its “unipolar” moment while handling foreign affairs on a case-by-case “just get through the news cycle” mode of operation. The U.S. would begin to ease its burden of leading the world in defense of the established international system.

But, in fact, a new world order was taking shape. The reality slowly dawned that what might now be called Islamism was the latest challenge to the modern state system based on an ideology that vowed to overthrow and replace every element of international comity that defined contemporary civilization. The tactic of terrorism would drain the energies and security services of the West through the post-Cold War period and deep into the new twenty-first century.

Most consequentially, the power centers of three continents were emerging by design and self-defined historical “inevitability” into political-ideological structures intended to transcend the modern international state order and to re-create neo-imperialistic spheres of influence. Russia toyed with the idea of democracy, soon was gripped by kleptocracy, and then—in the twenty-first century under a neo-tsarist, neo-commissar ruler—began a pattern of probing Western European weaknesses while envisioning itself as a transnational “Eurasian” realm. The People’s Republic of China finally bade farewell to Chairman Mao even while the Party continued to make use of his cultic adoration. China amassed wealth and power from responsible participation in the global economy until—near the end of the new century’s first decade—it revealed itself as seeking a “harmonious” world order even as it assertively began to deconstruct aspects of that order which failed to display “Chinese characteristics.”

The third power center of what may, not entirely frivolously, be imagined as the new century’s *dreikaiserbund* (Three Emperors’ League) is the Islamic Republic of Iran. By a deft mixture of diplomatic stratagems, support for terrorist agents, military and paramilitary deployment of a variety of militias, and a “foreign legion” in the form of Shia Lebanon’s Hezbollah (as well as a brilliantly executed nuclear “deal” with the United States), Iran has turned

itself in a strikingly short time into the suzerain of the northern swath of the Middle East. This territory extends from western Afghanistan through Iran itself, Shia Iraq, the satellite al-Assad regime in Syria, and most of Lebanon to the Mediterranean beaches. Iran is consolidating this after winning the major war for Syria with the decisive intervention of the Russian army and air force (providing Moscow with air, land, and naval bases in the process) while becoming recognized as a “threshold” nuclear weapons power that is reshaping the regional balance of power to its advantage.

Not content with these dramatic demonstrations, Iran also has been stitching together a northeast-to-southwest archipelago of influence through points in the Gulf, to threatening Shia unrest in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, and along supply routes to the pro-Iranian Shia Houthi war in Yemen—all this exhausting the Saudis in counteractions to keep Riyadh from being geo-strategically surrounded. As the People’s Republic of China intends to build One Belt, One Road across the Eurasian land mass and along maritime lanes to Africa, Iran is doing something similar horizontally and vertically across and down the Middle East.

This new Iran was launched in 1979 by the Islamist Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini which overthrew Shah Reza Pahlavi and riveted American emotions by storming the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and taking diplomatic personnel hostage for 444 days. As shocking as this was to Washington, the symbolic power message it carried has still not been fully grasped. The foundation of the modern international state (Westphalian) system has been diplomatic immunity guaranteed by every host country to the resident embassy officials of other states. Revolutionary Iran’s message should have been clear: The Islamic Republic sets itself against the established world order in every regard.

In 1979 few American analysts could explain this momentous event. I was present at a packed, hastily-called meeting open to all State Department employees to hear the just-returned from Tehran Foreign Service Officer known to be our finest expert. The most he could offer was his conviction that “We can do business with this Ayatollah.” To other experts, what had happened was one of “The Great Revolutions,” comparable to the French Revolution in 1789 and the Russian in 1917.

The admirable and underappreciated foreign affairs intellectual Adda B. Bozeman, professor emerita of Sarah Lawrence College at that time, stepped up to give context

to the Iranian upheaval. The revolution, she wrote, should be seen “as a victory for the general cause of Islam and as a defeat not so much for the Pahlavi dynasty as for the Iranian nation-state.”¹ The key to understanding would be the ancient “Persian world-state.” The Sassanian Empire of Persia had been conquered by Islamized Arabs in AD 630, but that was followed by “Iran’s conquest of Islam” as Arabs came to recognize and adopt Persian statecraft and administrative practices. These would provide a governing structure for the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates as well as those of the Mongols and Turks. Historically, Bozeman said, this Iranization of the Middle East eventually would prove more powerful than later Westernization.

Thus the rise of Iran to paramount power in the region may be historically inevitable, at least as seen from Tehran. The regime of the Ayatollahs has made striking use of ancient Persia’s culturally adaptive character: Ayatollah Khomeini transformed traditional Shia theology so that the clerics actually could rule rather than be “Quietist” in accord with Shia tradition. The Shah had doomed his rule by featuring pre-Muslim Persia’s Persepolis to the apparent disregard of Islam’s Mecca. The 1979 Revolution would be Islamic, but at the same time step into the role of Persian world-state. The new Islamic Republic would easily shift back and forth from its inherited position in the established international state system to its revolutionary aim of overthrowing that same system, as circumstances might make being either “in” or “out” of world order more immediately advantageous. The political structure adopted by this new revolutionary Iran resembles the Rousseauian model used by Cold War communist regimes to empower one-party rule, and employ revolutionary para-military forces beyond

the confines of conventional military laws of war. As with other revolutionary regimes, the “government” would be marginalized, as merely administrative and dominated by the “great leader” and his supra-governmental elite apparatus. The nuclear Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) stands as a monument to Iran’s strategic guile: a treaty that is not a treaty, one that binds the two parties in ways temporarily beneficial to both, but leaves Iran not only free to continue its double game but also doing so with resources provided by America’s massive sanctions relief.

Against this, US policy has ranged from contradictory to incoherent: from President Obama’s “Deal” which the region has taken to mean “The U.S. looks with favor on the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran to paramount power in the Middle East” to President Trump’s refusal to certify the “deal” while nonetheless keeping to its provisions while threatening to block Iran’s ambitions and expansive neo-imperial actions in unexplained ways.

Taken together, all this makes “Rolling Back Iran” the most perplexing, task in American strategy today – if the U.S. actually intends to take up this challenge.



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¹ Bozeman, “Iran: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tradition of Persian Statecraft,” in *Orbis*, Summer, 1979, pp. 387–402.



COUNTERING IRAN WHILE RETREATING

by Reuel Marc Gerecht

Time has almost run out for the United States to deny the Islamic Republic hegemony in the northern Middle East. The clerical regime has the high ground and the Americans are, at best, slowing Iranian advances. The approximately two thousand troops Washington has reportedly deployed to Syria, mostly in the north and the southeast, have prevented the Tehran–Moscow–Damascus axis from dominating all of the strategic locations in the country. But if President Trump really did tell Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that he will cut military aid to the Syrian Kurds, the most reliable of America’s disparate anti-Islamic State “partners on the ground,” and he meant it, it’s a decent guess America’s military presence will diminish. The Syrian Kurds, not an especially powerful or reliable ally against Iran and its allies, are the only competent local military force that Washington can conceivably use to put pressure on the victorious axis.

In the Persian Gulf, anti-Iranian forces are in better shape. But the status quo is in play, owing to the war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia’s energetic crown prince. Tehran has to lie in wait, avoiding the might of the US Navy while hoping the Sunni side does something sufficiently stupid to allow the mullahs to exploit convulsively local Arab Shiite grievances. The Achilles’ heel of Gulf stability is composed of the badly oppressed Shia of Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province, which is majority Shiite, and Bahrain, which, despite an energetic effort by the ruling Khalifa family to import Arab and non-Arab

Sunnis, remains heavily Shiite. If the Shiites went into a sustained armed rebellion, the economic consequences for the region would be massive. Saudi Arabia’s brutal (but, so far, ineffective) war against the Zaydi Shiites in Yemen—the Houthis—may well prove to be the Islamic Republic’s breakthrough among the Shia of the peninsula. If Tehran can successfully enlist the Houthis for a larger cause (getting even with the Saudis within Saudi Arabia), then it will have a permanent base of operations near enough to cause real trouble.

What Washington needs to do to roll back Iranian gains runs smack into what the Trump administration is prepared to do, which so far hasn’t been much. The president’s rhetoric against Iranian militancy has been tougher than Ronald Reagan’s or George W. Bush’s hardest orations. But Trump’s accomplishments on the ground have been few. The administration really has two options: to punish Iran economically or to roll back the mullahs militarily through the use of US forces. Strengthening the Gulf Arab states militarily, though highlighted by the White House, won’t change the fate of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen, and it won’t protect Saudi Arabia and Bahrain from internal sectarian trouble.

To punish Iran economically, the White House could withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reinstate all of the sanctions waived by the nuclear deal. Or it could keep the accord, as it is doing, but launch a tsunami of executive-branch sanctions against

the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, effectively shutting off most of the trade and finance allowed by the JCPOA. Such actions would end the illogic of trying to push back against the Islamic Republic while fueling its economy. So far, the administration is doing neither.

I was recently in Brussels and Paris. What was most striking was the relative equanimity that European officials had about Trump's intentions toward Tehran. The general view was perhaps best put by a French official who bluntly summarized his analysis of America's Iran policy since January 2017: "If he [Trump] were serious, he'd roll back the Iranians in Syria. If he were serious, he'd stop the Airbus sale."

The Boeing and Airbus deals, worth together nearly \$30 billion, are the commercial hinge of the nuclear accord: they are Iranian bait to create significant pro-Tehran commercial lobbies in Europe and the United States. They are also a means for the clerical regime to enhance its airlift capacity. The new planes, or older ones released from other services, will be at the disposal of the Revolutionary Guards and the tens of thousands of Shiite militiamen who have become an expeditionary force for Tehran. Philosophically, if not economically, these transactions will make or break Trump's Iran policy. And yet the president remains—even after his team finally completed the much-awaited Iran policy review—unclear. It actually appears he is inclined to allow the Airbus sale, which he could cancel by withdrawing the export licenses for the American parts that go into every Airbus plane. In a recent interview with Fox, the president said:

Honestly, I told them—they are friends of mine. They really are. I get along with all of them. Whether it's Emmanuel [Macron] or Angela [Merkel]. I told them just keep making money. Don't worry. You just keep making money. When Iran buys things from Germany, France, by billions of dollars, even us, they were going to buy Boeings—Boeings. I don't know what's going to happen with that deal. When they buy those things, it is a little harder. I told them just keep making money. Don't worry. We don't need you on this one.

Trump certainly appears to be in severe tension with the articulated policy of his national security adviser, General H. R. McMaster, who has publicly discouraged European investment in Iran where the Revolutionary Guards would profit—in other words, in the industrial and energy sectors that most attract Europeans. The

president doesn't seem to understand that an American economic pressure campaign against the Islamic Republic where the Europeans are free to trade is stillborn.

The ugly truth about the JCPOA, which Trump has decertified but maintained, is that it limits the responses Washington can use against the Islamic Republic. It elevates the nuclear question above all other concerns—regional aggression, the creation of Hezbollah-like Shiite militias throughout the greater Middle East, the massive slaughter of Syrian Sunnis, the generation of jihadism, Iranian human rights, democracy, and even terrorism (so long as Tehran doesn't target Americans). As Iranian President Hassan Rouhani often reminds his countrymen, the nuclear deal also creates Western pressure groups that will make it more difficult for Western governments to again mount crippling sanctions against Tehran. (Former Obama administration officials have actually become what Rouhani has been hoping for: an Iran lobby.)

If the White House now decides to up the ante on the mullahs' regional ambitions through sanctions, the president could kill the deal. There is a red line. The point where sanctions might possibly become effective in hurting the Islamic Republic's imperialist ambitions is probably the point where the Iranians abandon the JCPOA. Always more concerned about an Iranian-American collision than Iranian machinations, the Europeans will suss out where that line is and ardently encourage Washington to show its displeasure through measured sanctions that deliver bearable pain. Trump appears already there: the White House annoys Tehran with minor sanctions, sells more weaponry to Gulf Arabs, occasionally has a second-tier official—the secretary of state—give a speech on Iranian oppression, leaves some troops in Syria and Iraq, and calls it progress.

But the president is mercurial. If he walks from his predecessor's atomic accord, however, the administration would have to be prepared for the clerical regime to test Washington's resolve by openly reanimating parts of the nuclear program that had been slowed or dismantled. That means preventive military strikes, which the White House has so far shown no willingness to entertain. The same logic holds if Trump were to decide to deploy US forces directly against Iran and its many Shiite militias in Syria: the nuclear deal most certainly will die when more than a handful of American soldiers perish.

Politically, it is nearly impossible to imagine President Trump doing anything provocative given his domestic fragility. A sizable slice of the congressional Republican Party can't abide the president. Needless to say, the Democratic Party loathes him. Forceful American foreign policy is hard to wage when the opposition party is adamantly hostile; when a big slice of the president's own party doesn't trust the commander-in-chief, bold actions, especially those that could conceivably lead to conflict, become politically precarious if not impossible. Until the last fifteen years of the Cold War, when the Democratic Party started going seriously south, American containment of the Soviet Union, which always carried the risk of military confrontation, was bipartisan. The Korean, Vietnam, and first and second Gulf wars were all sufficiently bipartisan to fortify presidential will, at least initially. Bill Clinton's Yugoslav air campaign is a more interesting, atypical case, and might more closely resemble politically and militarily an American pushback in Syria against Iran and its Shiite militias. But even in the fight to stop Slobodan Milosevic, Clinton gathered

significant Republican support, enough to split the Republican opposition. It would be a very good day for Trump, assuming he had the volition to fight in Syria, if he could get, among Democrats, Clinton's level of Republican support.

If Trump doesn't leave the JCPOA in the coming months, he's probably locked in where Barack Obama left him. One has to imagine that Obama, who had a vision and implemented it, will smile as his successor again fails to undo his legacy.



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COUNTERING IRAN REQUIRES A POLITICAL STRATEGY

by Samuel Tadros

It was not supposed to end this way. As protests erupted across the Arabic-speaking world, Iran seemed to be on the losing side. True, Iran's leader, Ali Khamenei, had immediately called the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia "an Islamic liberation movement" and hailed them as "reverberations of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution." But as the protests spread from capital to capital and reached Damascus, not a few observers were confident that Iran would emerge weaker in the regional power game.

Such calculations were not without foundation. In Damascus, Iran's only regional ally, Bashar al-Assad was losing ground, forcing Iran to commit manpower and treasure to shore up his regime. Iran's all-out support for al-Assad meant that the Sunni-Shiite conflict became the dominant dividing line in regional politics. This diminished Iran's propaganda efforts at portraying itself as a revolutionary Islamic force to Sunni Arabs, destroyed Hezbollah's reputation as a resistance movement among Sunnis, worsened Iran's relations with Turkey, and cornered the Palestinian terror organization Hamas, which had long been a useful tool for Iran. More importantly, with questions of freedom and justice dominating the Arab-speaking world, few in Alexandria, Aleppo, or Aden had interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict, removing the issue from Iran's propaganda arsenal. Even the one bright spot for the Iranian regime—the uprising by Bahrain's majority Shiite population—was soon crushed by Saudi Arabia's ground intervention.

Seven years later, Iran has managed to emerge victorious, not only by successfully defending its turf, but also by acquiring new successes across the region. Bashar al-Assad remains in power and Western countries seem to be all but conceding that they can do little to change the facts on the ground. Iran's alliance with Russia is stronger than ever and Turkey's President Erdogan was forced to reach an accommodation with the Iranians. In Lebanon, Hezbollah's domination of the country is complete, with Sunnis forced to accept its ally as president after years of deadlock. Moreover, the rise of the Islamic State provided Iran with an opportunity to strengthen its control over Baghdad, unleash militias loyal to it in the country, and even force Western powers to accept its role in the anti-Islamic State fight, turning Iran into an ally of the West. Utilizing fissures in Iraqi Kurdistan's leadership, Iran was further able to roll back Kurdish gains, gain control of oil-rich Kirkuk, and undermine Kurdish aspirations and capabilities. In Yemen, despite historical doctrinal differences, Iran was able to utilize Zaidi grievances to undermine Saudi security; the Gulf dispute has only strengthened the Iranian-Qatari alliance.

Most important, however, is the nuclear agreement. Whether by design or ignorance, the nuclear agreement has only served to enshrine Iran's position in the region. Leaving the scientific and compliance issues aside, and even accepting the Obama administration's claims

regarding the agreement stopping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, Iran is today in a position where it does not even need a nuclear warhead, having achieved the results such a weapon would deliver. From the moment of its foundation, the Islamic Republic has had three key objectives; the regime's survival at home, acceptance by the international community, and the spread of the revolution abroad. By design or ignorance, the Obama administration delivered those three objectives with the nuclear agreement, ensuring the regime that Western powers would not attempt to change it, accepting Iran as part of the international community and a legitimate regional power with interests beyond its borders, and turning a blind eye to the spread of Iranian hegemony in the region. Who needs a nuclear weapon, when all these three objectives have been secured?

The Trump administration has indicated its displeasure with its predecessor's policies regarding the nuclear agreement and Obama's welcome of a Sunni-Shiite balance of power in the region. President Trump has strengthened ties with America's traditional allies in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia; supported Saudi war efforts in Yemen; and in general made rolling back Iran's regional influence a key objective. Nonetheless, the administration has so far lacked both an overall strategy and a ground game plan to achieve that strategy. Selling more weapons to Sunni powers and launching a few missiles at al-Assad after his continued use of chemical weapons against his people will do little to defeat Iranian designs if they are not coupled with a political strategy.

In order to roll back Iranian hegemonic designs in the Middle East, the United States needs to develop a multifaceted strategy and a ground game that together address the sources of Iranian power, utilize its weaknesses, and shore up its competitors' defenses. The first area of Iranian strength is its masterful ability to play internal fissures and grievances across the region to its advantage. Unlike American policy-makers, who remain fixated on the nation-state, Iranian policy-makers see a map of ethnic, political, and sectarian divides. With the political foundation of the broader Middle East—the nation state—crumbling, Iran has been able to utilize minority communities and create replicas of Hezbollah across the region. A US strategy designed to confront Iran's regional hegemony should forgo the traditional mindset of nation-states and deal with the region as it truly is, by developing intrastate relations and not just interstate. Such a new mindset would require the United States to develop a Kurdistan strategy that acknowledges the Kurdistan Regional Government

as an important ally with potential influence among all Kurdish speakers, including inside the Islamic Republic. Such a mindset would also forgo attempts at shoring up Lebanon's Hezbollah-controlled government and military and instead focus on building alternative competing forces within the country.

The second source of Iranian strength has been its ability to monopolize Shiite religious authority. The Arab Shiites' gaze will remain on Tehran as long as the main dividing line in the region is the Sunni-Shiite conflict and as long as Arab Shiites feel threatened by Sunnis and fearful of Sunni hegemony. The United States should help strengthen Arab Shiite religious and secular actors who reject the Iranian model and who take pride in their Arab or country-based identities. Such figures exist in Iraq among both its religious authorities and its politicians. The United States should help them develop an effective counterstrategy to Iranian infiltration.

Third, Iran has mastered the propaganda game in the Middle East. Iran's Arabic-language channel and media are highly effective in spreading Iranian propaganda, undermining American influence, and extending conspiracy theories about the West and Israel. With six million followers on Facebook, Iran's Arabic-language TV channel, Al-Alam, is a powerful tool. Any effective US strategy should seek to undermine and counter its message.

Fourth, despite the small Shiite populations of North Africa, Iran has created a substantial constituency for its message across the region through the use of scholarly visits to Tehran, book fairs, lectures, and trade deals. Across the secular-Islamist divide in North African countries, Iran has been able to find allies. To Islamists, Iran presents itself, not as a Shiite Islamic State, but as the only successful Islamic state. To seculars, Iran presents itself as their ally against Sunni Islamism. An effective US strategy to counter Iranian influence would center on American embassies utilizing soft power to weaken Iranian ground game strategies.

Iran is not an omnipotent power. The Iranian regime has fundamental weaknesses that an effective US strategy should utilize. For millions of Arabic speakers across the Middle East and North Africa, the Iranian model offers nothing beyond more misery. Internal Iranian regime practices should be highlighted, especially those pertaining to ethnic and religious minorities inside the country. More importantly, a key reason for Iran's ability to expand its power in the region has been the

lack of a threat at home. Iran has thus been allowed to play offense. An effective US strategy to counter Iran's hegemonic designs in the region should force the Iranian regime to play defense by strengthening alternative voices inside Iran, including political opponents and the multitude of minority communities that have been crushed by the Islamic Republic. Such a strategy should not have the goal of destabilizing Iran to the extent of a state collapse. But it should seek ways to weaken the regime's control internally.

Regardless of any efforts the United States exerts to weaken Iranian expansion in the region, the fundamental weakness of the Arabic-speaking world's political order will continue to invite interference and provide opportunities for Iranian designs. Any effective US strategy to counter Iran cannot ignore this fundamental flaw. America should instead shore up Iran's competitors' internal defenses. Policies by Sunni regimes that discriminate against their significant Shiite minority populations will continue to weaken them and increase Iran's influence. The lack of pluralism in the region and the attempt to homogenize different ethnic and religious minorities is bound to create a deadly backlash—in fact, this has already occurred. While the United States cannot, and should not, solve the region's internal ills, any effective US strategy

should look for opportunities to help these countries and communities develop responsive, pluralistic, and representative institutions.

For generations, Arab nationalists have rejected any non-Arab role in regional politics. This policy is flawed and unrepresentative. The Middle East is not solely Arab, but is instead a region of diverse ethnic and religious communities. The framework of the Arab League was flawed from the start; replacing it with an imagined Sunni alternative is equally misguided. There is a place for Iran in the Middle East as an important player. But that place should be reserved for a different Iran, an Iran that does not seek hegemony, an Iran that accepts the regional order and does not seek to undermine its neighbors.



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COLD WAR LESSONS FOR IRAN STRATEGY

by Karim Sadjadpour

“Strategy,” wrote Lawrence Freedman in his book of the same name, “suggests an ability to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees.” While Iran’s expanding influence in the Middle East is primarily the symptom of an underlying cause—the power vacuums created by the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 Arab uprisings—there is now a symbiotic relationship between Iranian ambition and Arab disorder. The latter accentuates the former, and the former accentuates the latter. Creating a stable, decent Arab order is at least a generational project. To counter Iranian ambitions requires a strategy that addresses both the symptoms and the cause.

What are Tehran’s regional ambitions? Since the 1979 revolution—which transformed Iran from a US-allied monarchy into a virulently anti-American theocracy—the twin pillars of Iran’s regional strategy have been opposition to America’s influence and to Israel’s existence. These pillars have remained remarkably consistent over the last four decades. In recent years a third pillar has emerged: rivalry with Saudi Arabia. While the acrimony between them is often framed as an ethno-sectarian conflict—Shiite Persian Iran versus Sunni Arab Saudi Arabia—it is driven primarily by geopolitical differences.

While Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies fear Tehran has expansionist designs over the entire region, the countries where Tehran wields most influence—Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen—are all plagued by weak or embattled central governments and profound societal

discord. Tehran did not create these power vacuums and societal rifts, but it has exploited and exacerbated them in pursuit of its ideological goals rather than the economic or security interests of the Iranian population.

Central to Iran’s strategy has been creating, arming, and funding nonstate militant groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah. In recent years, Tehran has franchised the Hezbollah model, creating Shia militias in Iraq (known as the Popular Mobilization Forces or Hashd al-Shaabi) and Syria (known respectively as the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Divisions, composed of Afghan and Pakistani Shia) and cultivating the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Tehran has invested billions of dollars and countless man-hours arming and training these militias. In Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, Iranian-backed militias are arguably a more cohesive, experienced, and formidable fighting force than the national armies in those countries. Tehran couples this hard-power strategy with a soft-power strategy in which these militias often provide social services, compete in elections, and even serve in government, blurring the civil-military line.

Therefore, an effective strategy for countering Iran cannot rely on hard or soft power alone and must be mindful of recent history. The last four decades of US policy toward Iran show Washington’s limited ability to change the nature or behavior of the Iranian regime. The George W. Bush administration routinely threatened Iran militarily

(“all options are on the table”) and championed Iran’s democracy activists. During Bush’s tenure, however, Tehran relentlessly attacked US forces in Iraq and the country’s reform movement withered.

The Obama administration, in contrast, tried harder than any US administration to mend relations with Iran, including numerous letters President Obama wrote to Ayatollah Khamenei. Yet despite the signing of the 2015 nuclear accord, Tehran’s hostility toward the United States and its longtime regional policies continued unchanged.

An effective Iran strategy must also be cognizant of political realities in both the United States and the region. After a decade and a half of lost blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq—with seemingly little return on investment—few Americans support the deployment of US soldiers to fight Iranian-backed militias or the expenditure of significant US capital to fortify and rebuild failing states. Fortifying US-aligned regional autocrats is not without costs, as it makes America potentially complicit at a time of heightened regional repression.

In his classic book *Strategies of Containment*, Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis argues that the United States’ successful containment of the Soviet Union—conceived by George Kennan—consisted of three pillars: (1) Restore the balance of power left unstable by the defeats of Germany and Japan and by the simultaneous expansion of Soviet influence in Europe and Asia; (2) fragment the international communist movement; and (3) convince Russian leaders that their interests could better be served by learning to live with a diverse world than by trying to remake it in their image.

While the Islamic Republic of Iran is a much less formidable adversary than the Soviet Union, a variation of this approach is a sound template for US strategy toward Iran: (1) build global unity and regional capacity against malign Iranian actions; (2) fragment Iranian power projection; and (3) compel Iran’s leadership to prioritize national interests before revolutionary ideology.

Build global unity and regional capacity against malign Iranian actions

Given that nearly 100 percent of Iranian trade is with countries other than the United States, unilateral US pressure is insufficient to deter or dissuade Iran. While the world’s great powers—the United States, China, Russia, and Europe—are united in their opposition to an Iranian nuclear weapon, building a multilateral consensus

against Tehran’s regional ambitions is more difficult. Russia cooperates with Iran in Syria, China views Tehran as a commercial economic partner in its Belt and Road Initiative, and many European countries see Iran as a tactical ally against the more nefarious threat of the Islamic State. Indeed, in a region plagued by failing states and civil war, Iran widely appears to be a stable regional power that should be engaged, not isolated. In contrast to former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose bombast helped unite the world against Iran, current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have helped rehabilitate Iran’s global image.

Countering Iran’s regional ambitions requires both capacity and resolve. In contrast to great powers which have enormous financial and political capacity to pressure Iran but lack resolve, regional countries—particularly Sunni Arab nations—are seemingly resolved in their opposition to Iranian ambitions but currently lack the capacity to counter or deter those ambitions. While building capacity among regional countries is a generational project, US leadership is essential in persuading global powers that Tehran’s support for regional militias and its complicity in Syrian slaughter fuel regional instability and radicalism.

Instead of highlighting Iran’s problematic regional policies, the Trump administration has instead focused on the one thing Iran is widely perceived to be doing right—adhering to the nuclear deal. In the court of international public opinion this has served to isolate Washington more than Tehran.

Fragment Iranian power projection

Among the major distinctions between the USSR and Iran is the fact that in contrast to the global communist movement, Tehran’s revolutionary Shia ideology has a much more limited appeal. What it lacks in global breadth, however, it has made up for in ideological fervor. Some of Iran’s Shia proxies—namely Hezbollah and some elements of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—appear deeply committed to Iranian revolutionary ideology. But others—including the Afghan Fatemiyoun division in Syria, Yemen’s Houthis, and other units within Iraq’s PMF—appear more motivated by economic expediency or the opportunity to counter the Islamic State than affinity for Iran. This provides an opportunity for Tehran’s rivals.

In recent months Saudi Arabia has attempted to fracture the perception of a united Iranian-led Shia front by making overtures to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. While al-Abadi and al-Sadr are not likely to turn into Iranian adversaries, nor are

they interested in being Iranian lackeys. As even former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki—someone widely considered to be an Iranian lackey—once said to then US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, “You don’t know how bad it can be until you’re an Arab forced to live with the Persians!”

Riyadh also has the resources, if it chooses, to undermine Iran in Yemen by financially co-opting the Houthis, its traditional approach. Over the long term the greatest bulwark against Iranian influence in Iraq and Yemen, as well as in Lebanon and Syria, is for national and/or Arab identity to supplant sectarian (Shia) identity.

Compel Iran’s leadership to prioritize national interests before revolutionary ideology

Iranian politics are authoritarian but not monolithic. Meaningful differences exist among competing political factions about how to best sustain the Islamic Republic. Self-proclaimed “principlists,” led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are loyal to the principles of the 1979 revolution, including strict Islamic conservatism at home and a “resistance” foreign policy abroad. “Pragmatists,” in contrast, led by President Rouhani, tend to prioritize economic interests before revolutionary ideology and believe the policies Iran adopted in 1979—such as “Death to America”—do not necessarily serve the country’s interests four decades later.

For Iran’s pragmatists, détente with the United States is a critical prerequisite for sustained economic growth. For Iran’s hard-liners, enmity toward the United States is a fundamental pillar of the revolution and is central to the identity of the Islamic Republic. While Iran’s pragmatists have shown a willingness to cooperate with the United States against Sunni radicals, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Iran’s hard-liners have shown a willingness to cooperate with Sunni radicals against the United States.

Convincing Tehran to put national interests ahead of revolutionary ideology requires a combination of coercion and engagement. Among the important lessons of the 2015 nuclear deal is that these policies are often complementary, not contradictory. Obama’s unprecedented but unreciprocated efforts to engage Iran helped convince much of the world that the obstacle to a nuclear deal lay in Tehran, not Washington. Though Obama was keen to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran

from the outset of his presidency, Tehran did not begin to seriously engage until several years later, when it faced a global economic embargo.

In the aftermath of the nuclear deal, the Obama administration only employed one aspect of this formula—engagement—to try to compel Iran to reconsider its regional policies. Tehran demurred; in contrast to the enormous costs it endured for its nuclear intransigence, it was subject to little penalty for its regional policies.

The policy of containment toward the Soviet Union was conceived in 1947 and endured numerous failures over five decades until it was eventually vindicated by the USSR’s collapse in 1991. While the future of Iran and US-Iran relations is unpredictable, it must be similarly emphasized that there are no quick solutions. History has shown that Iran relents when it faces international unity and is divided domestically. So far, however, the Trump administration has created the opposite dynamic, splintering international unity while unifying Tehran’s disparate political factions against a common threat.

Countering Persian power was a question that similarly preoccupied the ancient Greeks. The legendary Athenian historian Thucydides believed the greatest strategist of his day was Pericles, who ruled Athens for three decades from 460 BCE. Among Pericles’ notable achievements was building an alliance with rival Sparta—which worried about Athenian hegemony—against a common Persian threat. “The ability to persuade not only one’s people but also allies and enemies,” Freedman wrote of Pericles, “was a vital attribute of the successful strategist. In this way, strategy required a combination of words and deeds, and the ability to manipulate them both.”



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REPACKAGING TRUMP'S IRAN STRATEGY

by Sanam Vakil

The Trump administration has articulated a much-needed strategy designed to pressure and contain the Islamic Republic of Iran's malign regional influence, which spreads throughout Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. While reducing Iran's imprint and leverage throughout the Middle East is indeed imperative for regional stability, the Trump administration's methods and means will not prove successful because its strategy is zero sum against Tehran and a perpetuation of the traditional American approach to dealing with the Islamic Republic. Resuscitating US containment policy will not result in concessions or see an Iranian retreat. In fact, Tehran will double down on its positions and policies rather than yield to more rounds of US pressure. The consequences of this approach will not only foster greater distrust and inculcate wider sectarian tensions but will also further entrench the Islamic Republic's power and support back home in Tehran—all negative outcomes for Washington.

The Trump administration's Iran strategy, although not detailed to the wider public, appears to be a multipronged plan intended to drive out Iranian regional hegemony and "create a more stable balance of power" in the Middle East. To do so, Trump has taken a wide-ranging approach that requires the support of multiple partners and players. In a first step, he decertified the Iran nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in the hope that Congress and the European Union will improve the deal

and equally pressure Iran to partake in wider negotiations on its ballistic missile program and support for proxy groups. Washington is also working with Riyadh and Tel Aviv to incentivize and bolster Arab states such as Iraq and Lebanon to pressure Iranian-backed proxies such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Economic carrots for postwar reconstruction in Syria and Iraq are also being offered to tempt these states into opposing Iran. Riyadh, under the influence of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, is tasked with pushing a strident anti-Iranian propaganda campaign while also pressuring regional governments to take sides, as seen in the attempt at forcing Lebanon's Saad Hariri to resign as prime minister. Israel, on the other hand, through intelligence-sharing and military oversight in the Levant, is playing a critical role in pushing back against Tehran's plans for long-term political and economic influence on its borders.

While in theory this plan looks palatable on paper, in practice, without incentives or engagement, Iran will be backed into a corner, leaving little room to maneuver. Principally, this strategy will enhance Iranian insecurity fears and close the doors to further opportunities for post-JCPOA discussions. As such, a rethinking of the challenges and outcomes of this approach should be considered. A first mistake in this strategy is Trump's decertification of the nuclear deal. This move has confirmed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's fears of continued US opposition to the Islamic Republic, giving

him vindication and what many regard as just cause for his anti-American animus.

Trump's action is also resulting in an increase in popular Iranian frustration that is translating into greater national support for the regime. In this climate, Tehran's position at home will be strengthened as Iranians feel greater national loyalty. Moreover, having compromised and complied over the nuclear agreement, Tehran's takeaway is that Washington cannot be trusted to live up to its commitments thereby closing the door to further engagement or compromise on wider regional issues or its ballistic missile program.

A second mistake is Washington's over-reliance on Saudi Arabia to assist in this plan. Riyadh's aggressive anti-Iranian rhetoric equating Iran with the Islamic State and linking Khamenei to Hitler is rallying popular support in his favor. Moreover, it is worth noting that Saudi regional adventurism has created its own cycles of conflict evidenced most recently in the 2015 Yemen war and the marginalization of Qatar. In both cases, Tehran has taken advantage of Riyadh's mismanagement and triangulated relationships in Iran's favor.

By pitting one regional power against another, this plan will yet again exacerbate longstanding Iranian fears of isolation. Issues of regime security are most poignantly rooted in the national memory of the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war in which Iran's neighbors—including Saudi Arabia, the United States, and many European countries—collectively supported Iraq against Iran. During this period, which dovetailed with the consolidation of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran experienced regional and international isolation and encirclement that instituted a profound sense of paranoia among the political elite. Continued US government opposition to the Islamic Republic and implicit support for regime change in Tehran, evidenced in statements such as “all options remain on the table,” have fueled this paranoia. Iran's sense of strategic isolation is now imbued in the national political culture and is seen in the dominant themes of political, national, and economic resistance as well as in its unyielding commitment to its ballistic missile program.

Iran's foreign policy is driven by the goal of protecting regime stability and security. It is implemented through the policy of strategic depth. In this vein, Tehran has strategically protected itself from Israeli, American, and Saudi threats by pushing these challenges away from Iran's borders, gaining influence and leverage

opportunistically. Tehran is guided by domestic priorities and ideology, a sense of profound regional isolation, on-the-ground capacity development, and strategic patience. Iran's leaders use a mix of political support and relationships at the diplomatic level, soft power activities of trade and investment, cultural and religious ties, and the creation and training of a network of militia groups to increase their leverage and influence.

Tehran has long proven to be adept at manipulating regional crises to its advantage. It is in this atmosphere of instability—seen during the longstanding Lebanese civil war, 2001 Afghan war, 2003 Iraq war, 2011 Syrian civil war, and 2015 Yemen war—that Iran has sought political openings and seized chaos and opportunities to build relationships and networks in a diversified, long-term strategy of engagement. While its relationship with Hezbollah was its most enduring foray beyond its borders, Tehran has implemented this strategy most effectively in post-2003 Iraq. After the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian civil war, Iran applied this approach with greater rigor and confidence, providing an economic lifeline to Bashar al-Assad's regime, military and intelligence support, and the creation of militia groups. Through these relationships and at great expense, Iran has also gained long-sought regional relevance and an ability to influence and activate state and nonstate actors at multiple levels. Having played the long game, Tehran will not abandon its position easily or suddenly.

Against this backdrop, what is to be done?

To develop a successful Iran plan, Washington must consider the merits of engagement and pressure, marrying these tools for short-term gains and long-term strategy. It is through this combination of coercion and engagement that Iran and the P5+1 nations arrived at the JCPOA. This agreement, over a decade in the making, serves as a basis for continued conversation with the Islamic Republic. Such dialogue might not yield immediate results nor change Tehran's behavior. It will, however, increase bilateral understanding and lessen tensions over regional flashpoints.

From there, continued US support for the nuclear agreement should be used as a building block to further discussions with Tehran on wider regional security issues. Moreover, as party to the JCPOA, Washington should not obstruct sanctions relief and investment support in Tehran. Rather, it should use its multilateral

commitment to the deal to encourage economic and political liberalization.

In tandem, pressure will be an important and necessary instrument as well. In cooperation with European and regional partners, Washington should expose Iran’s underhanded regional activities ranging from military transfers to Islamic Republican Guard Corps support for proxy groups and terror groups. European cooperation here is critical and can be used to craft wider sanctions for such activities as a means to strangle Tehran’s regional network. Support for regional reconstruction and for building economic prosperity in war-torn regions of Iraq and Syria while supporting Lebanese independence is also critical to prevent Tehran from capitalizing on regional instability. Finally, Washington and Europe should prioritize the creation of a regional security dialogue with the objective of defining a new security framework that upholds the sovereignty and security of all regional states. This is no easy task. But if Washington is interested in long-term Middle Eastern stability, it needs a plan that promotes regional engagement and integration over division and polarization.

The facts on the ground are clear. Tehran has long prospered through cycles of regional conflict, imbalance, isolation, and instability. Almost four decades after the Iranian Revolution, it has proved resilient to US pressure and containment. Today, the Islamic Republic lumbers on as a symbol of adversity and resistance. The Trump administration should embrace a balanced plan reflective of historical, regional, and strategic realities to break—rather than embolden—Tehran’s narrative and vision and build a meaningful security architecture that can protect American interests in the region and beyond.



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THE LIMITS OF THE INDIRECT APPROACH

by Tony Badran

In October 2017, the Trump administration rolled out its long-anticipated policy to counter Iranian expansionism in the region. The policy pays significant attention to Hezbollah, Iran's principal instrument of regional power projection. After eight years of American courtship of Iran, which drastically elevated its regional position, pushing back against Tehran and its proxies was always going to be a formidable challenge.

For years, the Obama administration oversaw not just the strengthening of the Iranian position across the region but also the alignment of US policy with Iran. Under President Obama, US policy in Syria and Iraq assisted Iran in establishing a continuous geopolitical sphere of influence stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. In Lebanon, US policy, under the cover of supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), helped Iran secure the western end of this realm. Washington tacitly recognized Hezbollah's dominion in Beirut and winked at its synergetic relationship with the LAF. It increased its support to the LAF, which in turn assisted Hezbollah in securing its rear and the border with Syria. The end result has been that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) militias directly control the ground across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Facing this challenge required a major shift in US posture and priorities, along with clarity about how certain notions and policies had facilitated Iran's expansion. The Trump administration's overarching principle that

Iran is a destabilizing force which needs to be countered is a much-welcome departure from the previous administration's view of Tehran as a partner with whom we share fundamental interests in the region. However, many of the policy ideas currently in circulation either don't quite rise to the level and urgency of the challenge or, in some cases, work against the administration's declared principles and thereby inadvertently reinforce Obama's policy of realignment.

The case of Lebanon is instructive in this regard. The stronger elements of what the administration has disclosed about its anti-Hezbollah policy are geared primarily toward targeting the group's sources of funding and its global criminal enterprise—though these are insufficient on their own. The rest is far less tangible. It is centered on supporting "legitimate state institutions" in Lebanon and exposing Hezbollah's "nefarious behavior." The White House explained the reasoning behind this approach as follows: "Over time, we believe that by denying Hezbollah political legitimacy, it will lose the support of the Lebanese people."

Such woolly ideas, heavy on hopefulness over the indefinite long term and light on specific and credible mechanisms, make for an inadequate response to the nature of the challenge facing the United States and its allies in the region. Moreover, the concept behind this approach is inherently flawed. The "Lebanese state" is not some independent theoretical construct, separate

from, and in opposition to, Hezbollah. Hezbollah is not only a fundamental part of the Lebanese state, it also thoroughly permeates and dominates it and all its institutions. As such, “supporting legitimate state institutions” as a means to counter Hezbollah is a contradiction in terms: supporting a state and institutions controlled by Hezbollah by definition helps Hezbollah.

Political competition and information campaigns are likewise deficient tools. It's not just that the political class in Lebanon is entangled with Hezbollah, or that it wouldn't be able to unseat Hezbollah from its position of absolute supremacy. It's also that Hezbollah is a special unit of the IRGC—a military force which is part of the command structure of a regional power. Hezbollah is not playing by different rules: it's playing a different game altogether.

And herein lies the problem. So far, US policy has relied on an indirect approach, premised on avoiding direct confrontation with Iran and its instruments. Policy-makers might believe that building up state institutions and denying Hezbollah and its sister groups “political legitimacy” over the long haul was the smarter, more sophisticated way to counter Iran. However, twelve years after this approach was tried in Lebanon, the result has been the consolidation of Hezbollah's control, the total capitulation of its erstwhile political adversaries, and the exponential growth of its military power. Meanwhile, just as Hezbollah's territorial control has expanded into Syria, the IRGC has been busy lapping up real estate and state structures from Baghdad to Beirut.

Consequently, this indirect, long-term approach has proven futile and counterproductive. Beyond that, it confuses US priorities. America's interest in the Levant always was straightforward: cutting off Iran's overland route to Lebanon and choking off and degrading Hezbollah. The critical arena for pursuing this objective is Syria.

Syria is much more than Iran's principal conduit for logistical support to Hezbollah. The IRGC and Hezbollah now directly control territory, command local IRGC franchises, and have constructed military infrastructure in the country. The border area with Lebanon has gone from being strategic depth to being Hezbollah-controlled terrain. The area between Damascus, south Lebanon, and the Golan Heights is now an Iranian zone. And, most recently, Hezbollah and the IRGC and their Iraqi units have connected on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border.

These developments represent a strategic setback for the United States and its allies. America had an opportunity to prevent this outcome during the previous six years. The Obama administration's expressed policy at the time, however, was to respect Iran's “equities” in Syria. This opportunity was squandered and the position of Syrian anti-Iranian forces is far weaker today. But the overriding US interest in Syria has not changed: disrupt this Iranian territorial link and degrade Hezbollah and the IRGC and their weapons capabilities in Syria and Lebanon. This is a priority that the United States still can, and should, pursue, even if it requires a more direct involvement today than it would have a few years ago.

The Iranian forces are vulnerable. They are overstretched and, in certain cases, they are operating in exposed terrain. The new military structures they are building are equally exposed. Israel has been exploiting these vulnerabilities to target military installations, bases, and weapons shipments, as well as senior IRGC and Hezbollah cadres. The Russian presence has not deterred the Israelis. The United States should reinforce this Israeli policy by adopting Israeli red lines as its own. And, using the considerable elements of US power in the region, it can expand this campaign against Iran's and Hezbollah's military infrastructure, arms shipments, logistical routes, and senior cadres. Local Syrian groups in eastern and southern Syria, and their sponsors, should also be empowered to take part in this endeavor.

Having the United States behind this policy strengthens Israel's position vis-à-vis the Russians and provides it more room to maneuver, especially in the case of a conflagration with Hezbollah that expands to Lebanon. Throughout the Syrian war, the US position has held sacrosanct Lebanese stability, even as Lebanon was the launching pad for Hezbollah's war effort in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and even as the group multiplied its stockpile of missiles aimed at Israel. Should the targeting of IRGC and Hezbollah assets lead to an escalation that encompasses Lebanon, the United States should offer full backing to Israel as it destroys Iran's infrastructure in Lebanon and degrades its long arm on the Mediterranean. Lebanon's stability, insofar as it means the stability of the Iranian order and forward missile base there, is not, in fact, a US interest.

The Trump administration's anti-Iran posture and its recognition that Iran is an adversary, not a partner, is a much-needed corrective to the previous administration's policy. The profound strategic challenges and geopolitical

shifts which resulted from Obama's policy of realignment with Iran severely complicate the task of pushing back against Tehran in the region and significantly narrow US options. The moment calls for strategic clarity and a set of policies that rise to the nature of the challenge. While there's room for measures that work over the long term, the United States also needs other options to address immediate priorities.



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IRAN THRIVES IN THE LEVANT ON WEAKENED STATES THREATENED BY SUNNI RADICALISM

by Fabrice Balanche

The announced defeat of the Syrian rebellion and the Islamic State is favoring the extension of Iranian influence in the Levant. The Iranian corridor between Beirut and Tehran via Baghdad and Damascus is now a reality. Territorial continuity was achieved symbolically at the end of May 2017, when Iranian-funded Shia militias joined on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border north of al-Tanf. In Iraq, Iranian allies Syria and Lebanon dominate; people support them out of fear, default, or sympathy. If the West wants to fight against the Islamic Republic's influence in the Levant, it must understand the root causes pushing more and more Lebanese Christians, Iraqi Shiites, and Syrian Sunni Arabs into the Iranian camp.

From the “axis of resistance” to the protection of minorities

The fight against Israel through the “axis of resistance” is still a popular cause in Iran and the Arab countries. It is also a mobilizing slogan for Sunni jihadist groups. In July 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri justified his call for jihad in Syria with very anti-Israeli rhetoric¹:

“Our blessed fury and mighty uprising will not calm until we raise the victorious banners of Jihad above Jabal Mukabir in the beloved, usurped Jerusalem.”

Whenever a Sunni country proclaims itself the defender of the Palestinian cause—as Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser or Iraq under Saddam Hussein—Iran can exploit it to conquer the Arab street. As long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists, the congenital anti-Israeli feeling of the Ayatollah's regime will exert a power of attraction over Sunni Arabs. After the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah was the most popular personality in the Arab world. In Syria, a few thousand Sunnis even converted to Shiism. Therefore, this parameter should always be taken into consideration, even if it is not the main one.

However, the real cause of Iran's rise in the Levant is sectarian and religious. Paradoxically, theocratic Iran became the protector of non-Sunnis and even secular Sunnis against jihadism.

The main fear of Christians and Shiites in the Levant is to be overwhelmed by Sunni Islam. Although the Sunnis are a minority in Lebanon and Iraq, they consider themselves the only legitimate community to exercise power, since they belong to the majority in the Arab and Muslim world. The concept of minority-majority needs to be assessed throughout the Middle East to understand the fear that drives non-Sunnis and the sense of superiority that drives Sunnis. The ethnic criterion introduces more

¹ “Al-Qaida Leader Zawahiri Praises Syrian Protesters,” The Guardian, July 28, 2011, accessed December 4, 2017.

complexity in the case of the Kurds. Although Kurds are mostly Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, they were marginalized by the Arab Sunnis, too.

A politico-religious hierarchy dating from the Middle Ages persists in the Middle Eastern psyche. The end of the Ottoman Empire changed the system marginally. In Iraq, the British entrusted power to the Sunni Arabs against the Shiite majority, which kept it until the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The Alawite and Druze statelets created by France reintegrated in Sunni Arab Syria in 1936. At that time, Shia minorities were more or less reassured by a fatwa from the mufti of Jerusalem, who recognized them as belonging to Islam. However, it was a very tactical fatwa used to unify the Muslims against the Zionist project in Palestine and French and British colonization. In independent Syria, Alawites and Druze were not considered equal to Sunnis until the Baathist Revolution of 1963. Only Lebanon escaped Sunni rule, since it obtained a separate independence from Syria. The Christians were thus freed from the dhimmitud in which they lived for centuries.² Lebanon was the only nation in the Arab world where Christians really enjoyed equal rights with Muslims. The massive emigration of Iraqi Christians after 2003 and of half of the Christian community from Syria since 2011 reminds them of the fragility of their situation in Lebanon.

Iran as recourse against radical Islam—and electricity shortages

The failure of the Nasserist or Baathist version of the Arab nationalist development model and the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a geopolitical power led to a re-Islamization of Middle Eastern societies, for which the Islamic State is arguably the supreme stage. For the minorities—Shiites and Christians—the progress of Sunni political Islam is worrisome. The secularism of the Syrian regime, even dominated by the Alawites, was a guarantee of protection for minorities and even secular Sunnis. This explains why Bashar al-Assad still enjoys support in the Syrian population, including among Sunnis. In Lebanon, the danger was embodied by the Islamic State. In addition, Syrian Islamist rebels pushed most of the Christians, however anti-Syrian, to Hezbollah's side, contributing to the election of Michel Aoun as Lebanese president in 2016.

² Christians and Jews are considered in Islam as dhimmi: "protected people." In exchange for paying a special tax, they can practice their religion. But in the law, they are not equal to Muslims

Denominational minorities and secular Sunnis are getting closer to Iran because they need protection from the Sunni agenda or from radical Islam. Unfortunately, the West was unable to protect them. We are still very naïve about the politics of Sunni Islam.

The Syrian crisis has thus pushed into the Iranian camp those social categories that were pro-Western but have felt abandoned. In Lebanon, Christians' resentment has only increased since the al-Hariri family seized the country. The construction by Rafiq al-Hariri of the Great Mosque of Beirut, whose size overwhelms the neighboring Maronite cathedral, is the best symbol of a natural hegemony of Sunni Islam in the Levant. Originally, al-Hariri had promised the patriarch that the mosque would be the same size as the cathedral, symbolic of the reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. But he lied. He wanted to build a huge mosque in downtown Beirut to show Sunni domination of the city. Expression of Islamic superiority over Christianity was a common practice in the Ottoman Empire, where any church was dwarfed by the nearby mosque. However, the Lebanese prime minister, friend of the West and representative of a moderate Islam, remained above all convinced of his political and religious superiority.

Rafiq al-Hariri was the Saudis' man. As Lebanon's leader, he was compliant with the Salafists and dismantled the state apparatus. This helped push the Shiites—left behind by this politico-economic system imported from the Gulf—into the arms of Hezbollah. Unlike the Lebanese state, Hezbollah provides its supporters with health services, education, and various material support. In return, they give it their votes and join its troops. In Syria, after six years of war, and in Iraq, after fourteen years of violence, people only aspire to safety and the provision of their basic needs: drinking water, electricity, education, and health. They are ready to give up their political demands in return for the restoration of a protective state.

Rebuilding secular states

Fighting the root causes that allow the Islamic Republic to attract support is a long-term process. As with communism in ruined Europe after the Second World War, Iran prospers on misery and insecurity, plus the fear of Sunni hegemony. The West should therefore encourage Sunni Islam to abandon its domineering character and push Muslim states to delete religious

references from their legislation. Significant progress will be made with the end of stipulations that Islam is the religion of the head of state and with the allowance of civil marriage, as is the case in Tunisia. Finally, the state must be sufficiently protective that citizens can rely on it instead of the community. Nonstate actors will then lose their capacity for massive recruitment.

**Fabrice Balanche**

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ROLLING BACK IRAN: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

by **Russell A. Berman**

A question mark is hanging over American grand strategy. The triumphal optimism that marked the end of the Cold War has given way to profound anxiety about the future of the international order. American supremacy has frayed and ominous challenges have emerged. We have entered difficult times. How did we lose our advantage? Can we reclaim it?

The opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet empire were widely viewed as proof positive of the victory of the West in the Cold War and, above all, as a clear indication of the primacy of the United States. Only one superpower remained in place, seemingly unchallenged and with no significant competitor for global hegemony. The United States dominated the world order and globalization apparently meant Americanization. A new American century was about to begin.

Yet that confidence in the liberal democratic international order and in American leadership to guarantee it has been profoundly shaken. As early as the 1990s, criticisms of the monopolar view of the world began to circulate, even in Western Europe, our vital partner in the transatlantic alliance. The 9/11 attacks exposed American vulnerability to the world, shattering the myth of invincibility. Responses to the Iraq War split the United States from some traditional allies and mismanagement of the war's aftermath undermined real achievements. The seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan fed a growing domestic

antipathy to foreign engagements.

That war-weariness found expression in the Obama administration's agenda to withdraw from the Middle East, an isolationism from the left, bolstered by the argument that nation-building at home should be prioritized. The rhetoric of the Trump campaign sometimes echoed the same isolationism, this time from the right, and with a similar, if more explicit, language of putting America first. The American public, along with parts of the political class, has grown less committed to the notion of American responsibility to safeguard the international order and the world has become less convinced of the credibility of American leadership.

Perhaps the post-Cold War vision of a monopolar Pax Americana was overstated, just as the elation of the victory over communism blinded commentators to the rising threat of Islamism. After all, the Iranian Revolution with its consistently anti-American vision had taken place a decade before the unification of Germany. Yet despite such qualifications, there can be little doubt that in the early 1990s the United States occupied a strategically advantageous position. A major question for historians of American strategy can only be: How was this advantage squandered? How has America moved from a firmly ensconced superpower, with no viable competition, to a beleaguered giant, with adversaries large and small doing their best to push it into withdrawal and retreat? This inversion of the American position in the world reflects

flawed strategic planning over several administrations and a foreign policy elite that failed to halt this slide from strength and security to threats and exposure.

The United States finds itself today in a more dangerous situation than has prevailed for decades. Putinist Russia is reasserting its influence throughout the former Soviet space, especially in Europe. In Ukraine, it has used force to redraw international borders. It is difficult to think of a more blatant challenge to international order and the expectation of a rule of law. Yet there is no credible strategy at hand to compel a Russian retreat, not from eastern Ukraine and certainly not from Crimea. Furthermore, Russia has been able to reassert itself as a key player in the Middle East, meaning that the American success in driving Russia out of the region in the 1970s has now been reversed. Russia is trying to become the power broker in Syria, it has a firm collaboration with Iran, and it is even reestablishing its connections to Egypt. In the Pacific, the United States faces a rising China with hegemonic aspirations, only amplified by the aggressiveness of its client state in North Korea, which Beijing has done little to constrain. Decades of American foreign policy, at least since the 1994 crisis, have kicked the North Korean can down the road, providing Potemkin solutions. Today, the entire US mainland is within range of missiles from Pyongyang.

Such is the global context for any consideration of the Middle East today and for US policies toward Iran. Rather than treating the region exclusively as a narrow set of local problems, American leaders need to recognize the region's significance on the wider map of global competition. America's two major power adversaries—China and Russia—are both intent on pushing back the scope of American influence from the two sides of the Eurasian land mass. They each benefit, furthermore, from de facto coordination with their more vocally anti-American partners, North Korea and Iran, which have their own growing nuclear profiles. Beijing and Moscow may appear relatively moderate in contrast to Pyongyang and Tehran, but in neither case has the major power seriously limited its partner's hostile ambitions. The result is an elaborate network designed to undermine US power and influence.

This backdrop explains why the question of rolling back Iran is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of the local history of the region or the particular narrative of US-Iranian relations. The Middle East, and especially the Levant and the Gulf, have become terrains in which the

global power competition is being played out. Above all, this struggle involves the United States on the one hand and the Iranian-Russian alliance on the other, although now even China is sending “anti-terror” forces. At stake is the future of American leadership in the international order that our adversaries are trying to reduce. Washington needs a strategic response to this grave challenge.

Given the global implications of this regional conflict, inconsistency in US policies is especially disconcerting. The White House has staked out a laudably strong position, challenging Iran with regard to its destabilizing role in the region. It has also indicated dissatisfaction with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), although the specific steps taken so far have not yet jettisoned the arrangement. Foreign policy voices in Congress sometimes sound more hawkish than the president. Yet, at the same time as Washington pushes back against Iran on a high level and very publicly, the United States appears to have chosen not to block the Iranian pursuit of a “land bridge” through Syria, which will establish a direct connection between Iran and Lebanon and therefore a considerable strengthening of Tehran's influence. Under the Trump administration, the United States has contributed significantly to winning the war against the Islamic State. But American policies have not prevented Iran and its client, the Bashar al-Assad regime, from becoming the ultimate benefactors.

There is an apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, America's challenge to Iran regarding the JCPOA and, on the other, its reticence to challenge Iran and its allies on the ground in Syria. This disjunction is all the more tragic because Syria provides a case where a realistic pursuit of American interests, countering our international competitors, would coincide with the idealism of American values by siding with the democratic forces in Syria, the heirs to the initial rebellion and the adamant opponents of the al-Assad dictatorship.

The reticence to date to push back against Iranian proxies in Syria is perplexing and difficult to understand, but several factors may be contributing to the outcome. First, given the North Korean threat, US policy-makers may be prudently reluctant to open up another front. Second, the de facto accommodational policy—refraining from opposing the expansion of Iranian power—likely depends in part on Obama-era holdovers in the government bureaucracy, still committed to the previous administration's goal of promoting Iran as the new regional hegemon. Third, Trump's own predisposition,

not dissimilar to his predecessor's, is to avoid a full-scale ground war. Each of these different elements helps clarify the same phenomenon: the lack of resistance to Iranian expansionism, which is at odds with the muscular rhetoric from the White House about the JCPOA.

Furthermore it is plausible that escalated American resistance to Iran is yet to come, but it may play out on a different front: not in Syria but in the Gulf. Moreover, it is likely to be outsourced to regional US allies rather than depend on a greater commitment of US troops. The Obama-era policies left the United States in a weakened position in the region. The Trump administration has had to overcome that handicap. An ambitious resistance to Iranian hegemony could also take the conflict back into Iran proper, strengthening sanctions while supporting anti-regime forces and the claims of the growing minority populations.

Whatever may emerge from competing perspectives in Washington, Syria remains a vital theater for the

competition with Iran and the United States has natural allies in the democratic forces there. The Syrian opposition will not easily give up the fight against Iranian imperialism, nor will it embrace an al-Assad regime fully reliant on Tehran and Moscow. We should admire the fortitude of these resistance forces which have survived chemical warfare, barrel bombs, and ethnic cleansing. It is through supporting them that rolling back our enemies could succeed.



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THE CARAVAN

The Caravan is envisaged as a periodic symposium on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. It will be a free and candid exchange of opinions. We shall not lack for topics of debate, for that arc of geography has contentions aplenty. It is our intention to come back with urgent topics that engage us. Caravans are full of life and animated companionship. Hence the name we chose for this endeavor.

We will draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman and Charlie Hill co-chair the project from which this effort originates.

For additional information and previous issues of The Caravan visit www.hoover.org/caravan

Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world.

Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.



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