THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN

COOPERATION WHERE POSSIBLE, CONFRONTATION WHEN NECESSARY

April 2018
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Cooperation Where Possible, Confrontation When Necessary

Capstone Joint Report
The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

Washington, D.C.
April 2018

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The authors would like to thank Ambassador Stephen D. Mull for his exemplary advice and guidance throughout the process of creating this report. Without his support, this report would not have been possible.

All opinions contained herein are the authors’ own.
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Source: The CIA World Factbook
MAP 2: THE PERSIAN GULF

Source: The CIA World Factbook
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<tr>
<th>ACRONYMS</th>
<th>FULL NAME</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANDSF</td>
<td>Afghan National Defense and Security Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3/EU+3</td>
<td>Germany, France, United Kingdom, United States, Russia, China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FATF</td>
<td>Financial Action Task Force</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>IAEA</td>
<td>International Atomic Energy Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICBM</td>
<td>Intercontinental Ballistic Missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>INARA</td>
<td>Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRGC</td>
<td>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRGC-QF</td>
<td>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIL</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant</td>
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<td>ISKP</td>
<td>Islamic State in Khorasan Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>IVLP</td>
<td>International Visitor Leadership Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCPOA</td>
<td>Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTCR</td>
<td>Mission Technology Control Regime</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NPT</td>
<td>Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty</td>
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<td>PMF</td>
<td>Popular Mobilization Forces</td>
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<td>SFA</td>
<td>Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq</td>
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<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNSCR</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council Resolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>WMD</td>
<td>Weapons of Mass Destruction</td>
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Nearly every issue in the Middle East is affected by U.S. policy towards Iran. These issues include: 1) Middle East stability; 2) the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan; 3) the eradication of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Hezbollah; 4) the security of the state of Israel; 5) countering regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; 6) the free flow of energy; and 7) the organic evolution of the Iranian government to one more friendly to the United States. Iran has the potential to be either a helpful partner or a serious opponent to U.S. regional interests, making the bilateral relationship critical.

The United States must carefully consider where to cooperate with Iran, as well as where to adapt to or counter Iran’s growing regional influence. Failure to plan for Iran’s regional ambitions will reduce Washington’s strategic options in a region critically vital to U.S. national interests. However, there is major disagreement about Iran’s strategic and foreign policy goals, hinging on two contending perspectives. The first views Iran as a revisionist power with regional hegemonic ambitions, while the second argues Iran’s actions abroad are primarily defensive in nature. Reality is always more complex, and the truth lies in between these differing interpretations, as will be demonstrated in this report.

Following a general background on the U.S.-Iranian relationship and the interests of each in the Persian Gulf, the report will address the objectives of Iran and the United States on a country-specific basis. Concerning Afghanistan, the paper focuses on the shared U.S. and Iranian objective of preventing the Taliban from regaining control of the country, and identifies avenues for cooperation on counter-narcotics and water security. On Iraq and Syria, the report adopts a more critical approach to Iran. It recommends a strategy aimed at pushing back malign Iranian influence and employing coercive diplomacy to meet U.S. objectives. The report then analyzes the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as well as legitimate concerns over Iran’s ballistic missile program, ultimately advocating for continued U.S. participation in the JCPOA. It discusses the impact of U.S. calls for regime change in Iran and recommends an alternative approach to encouraging long-term change through public diplomacy. It concludes with an assessment of the interplay between different policy recommendations.

The report recommends a strategy that applies pressure when necessary, but also capitalizes on opportunities for cooperation and engagement. This approach would best serve broad U.S. strategic interests and minimize the risk of escalation. Each of the policy recommendations for implementing this strategy are interrelated. If the United States pushes too hard in one area, it may provoke a symmetric or asymmetric reaction from Iran in another, making a more nuanced approach essential.
In the post-World War II era, few bilateral relationships are as charged and fraught with security implications as that of the United States and Iran. Mutual distrust and hostility have dominated the relationship, with major political and security repercussions for the Middle East. Despite U.S. containment efforts, Tehran has established itself as a regional power over the last two decades. This is in part because of the Bush administration’s consequential decision to invade Iraq and topple its government, which created space for Iran to expand its regional influence. Iran has the potential to be either a helpful partner or serious opponent to U.S. regional interests, which makes the bilateral relationship critical. There is no issue in the region today that is not affected by U.S. policy towards Iran—including the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan; the fight against terrorism; Israeli security; energy accessibility and supply; and the security architecture of the Persian Gulf.

This report analyzes areas of potential conflict and convergence and develops policy recommendations for the U.S. government on how to manage its complex relationship with Iran. It concludes that the general principle guiding U.S. policy should be engagement where U.S.-Iranian interests align, underpinned by a willingness to push back to achieve U.S. objectives and safeguard its interests.

While there is room for extensive cooperation between the United States and Iran in Afghanistan and on Persian Gulf security, extensive Iranian interference in Syria and Iraq is harmful to U.S. interests. A strategy aimed at stemming this malign influence requires policy recommendations that employ coercive diplomacy and deterrence to meet U.S. objectives.

The report begins with an overview of U.S. and Iranian interests in the Middle East, and discusses overarching themes affecting the relationship. It continues with an examination of four geographic areas of concern: the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. It proceeds to analyze counter-proliferation efforts, including the future of U.S. participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and possible scenarios in the event of a U.S. withdrawal. The report discusses the
impact of U.S. calls for regime change, and recommends an alternative approach to encouraging long-term change in Iran through public diplomacy. It concludes with an assessment of the interplay between different policy recommendations.

A TROUBLED HISTORY

U.S.-Iranian engagement has been dominated by mutual distrust and hostility since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The United States has many legitimate grievances against Iran, including: its support for terrorism and regional proxy militias, which have harmed U.S. personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon; the 1979-80 hostage crisis, during which 52 U.S. diplomats were held captive for 444 days; Iran’s hostility towards Israel; the country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons capability; its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia; and its abysmal human rights record. These grievances have led the United States and the international community to levy continuous sanctions against Iran since 1979.

On human rights in particular, the international community, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, has highlighted several areas of concern, including: frequent employment of the death penalty; arbitrary arrest and detention; lack of standardized due process; the use of torture to obtain confessions in prisons; repression of free speech; baseless detention of dual nationals; and persecution of minority groups. The international community would like to see an improvement in Iran’s human rights record. However, the regime seeks to maintain its control over information and communication platforms in advance of the transition to a new Supreme Leader. From Iran’s perspective, the United States uses human rights as a convenient excuse to weaken it financially, and has pointed to U.S. support for Saudi Arabia and other authoritarian regimes as evidence of U.S. hypocrisy on this issue.
Iran has a long list of legitimate grievances against the United States, too. Iranians have a strong sense of national pride, a long historical memory, and a deep aversion to foreign interference. This stems from foreign capture of its oil industry in the early 20th century and the 1953 British- and American-led coup which overthrew the country's democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. More recently, Iran resents what it perceived to be U.S. support for Iraq during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war; the destruction of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes in 1988, which killed 290 civilians; perceived encirclement by U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq; and intermittent calls for regime change by high-level U.S. officials. U.S. politicians often call for regime change in Tehran to appear tough on foreign policy and to mobilize their domestic bases. Iran is easy to target rhetorically, with seemingly few consequences. However, this report will demonstrate that calls for regime change do, in fact, have a negative impact on U.S.-Iranian relations, as well as on living conditions for the Iranian people, and will argue that the United States should refrain from calling for regime change.

**U.S. INTERESTS IN THE REGION**

The question of whether the United States should engage or confront Iran depends heavily on individual U.S. interests in the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf in particular. Although each U.S. administration has pursued diverse goals and strategies for handling the region, there have consistently been seven priorities: 1) Middle East stability; 2) the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan; 3) the eradication of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Hezbollah; 4) the security of the state of Israel; 5) countering regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; 6) the free flow of energy; and 7) the organic evolution of the Iranian government to one more friendly to the United States.
IRANIAN INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Iranian interests in the Middle East include: 1) establishing a corridor of direct or indirect control of territory that could function as a “land bridge” from Tehran to Beirut; 2) a stable Afghanistan and Iraq with political systems it can continue to influence; 3) balance of power with Saudi Arabia, achieved by supporting Shiite proxy militias throughout the region; 4) the ability to counter U.S. regional influence and military presence; 5) regime security; 6) security of its borders against drug trafficking and terrorism; and 7) room to develop economically and ensure Iranian oil can reach international markets.

U.S. PERSPECTIVE ON IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

There is major disagreement among U.S. policymakers about Iran’s strategic and foreign policy goals, hinging on two contending perspectives. The first views Iran as a revisionist power with regional hegemonic ambitions, while the second argues that Iran’s actions abroad are primarily defensive in nature. To paraphrase former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the debate is typified by whether Iran should be considered a nation or a cause.¹ Tehran’s support for the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq supports the assumption that Iran is trying to expand its influence in order to achieve a dominant position in the Middle East. The same debate informs U.S. views on continued Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) development of ballistic missile technology and nuclear capabilities. Additionally, U.S. policymakers debate whether Iranian officials’ bellicose statements against Israel and the United States are primarily rhetorical or indicate explicit ideological directives. Reality is always more complex, and the truth lies in between these two different interpretations.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran resembles a zero-sum game, with devastating consequences for the Persian Gulf region and the wider Middle East. Saudi-Iranian confrontation on multiple fronts—evidenced by numerous ongoing proxy wars—has transformed the Middle East into a complex battlefield for regional hegemony. Iran is the only country in the Gulf region that must provide for its own security, since it is neither a U.S. ally nor part of any regional security architecture. When it looks at the Middle East, Iran sees few friends and many rivals, some of which are supported by U.S. troops.

In 2016, Iran spent around three percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on its military, significantly less than the amount spent by Saudi Arabia (10.4 percent of GDP), Israel (5.8 percent), Iraq (4.8 percent), and Jordan (4.5 percent), putting Iran in eighth place regionally. The country’s military spending lags in absolute terms, too. In 2016, Saudi Arabia spent $63.7 billion on defense, while Iran spent only $12.7 billion. Iran’s limited military capabilities motivated it to create an “axis of resistance” by supporting proxy militia forces and developing a ballistic missile program.

This strategy of “forward defense” has proven to be extremely effective for Iran. It has successfully kept conflicts away from its borders and shaped political processes and foreign policy in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Through its development of proxy militia forces, Iran has functionally built a “land bridge” that runs from Tehran to Beirut through Iraq and Syria.

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5 Ibid.
The land bridge expands its sphere of influence to the Mediterranean Sea; establishes a corridor to one of its most valuable proxies, Hezbollah; and would facilitate logistical supply lines in the event of a military confrontation with Israel.

**Iran’s Land Bridge**

The United States has several options for engagement with respect to Iranian and Persian Gulf security. The first is to try to contain Iran through intensified unilateral and multilateral sanctions, combined with a strengthened military partnership with Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The second option is to use behavior-driven inducements, including lifting sanctions
and increasing cooperation, to preserve a stable regional balance of power.\textsuperscript{6} Another important issue is the current crisis between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition. Iran is currently helping Qatar evade the embargo on its ports. The blockade has failed to achieve its original objective of forcing Doha to sever relations with Iran and cease funding terrorism; on the contrary, it has actually pushed the two countries closer together and undermined U.S. influence in Qatar—a long-standing U.S. ally and the host of 10,000 American troops.\textsuperscript{7} However, if Iran displays a willingness to constructively resolve this crisis with the GCC states, it would demonstrate good will and lay the foundation for a discussion on Persian Gulf security.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1) **Take steps to increase communication between Iran, the United States, and the Gulf states.**

The United States should identify potential emergency communication lines to establish between Iranian, U.S., and Gulf state governments, with due consideration given to military commanders. This would help mitigate miscommunications or misunderstandings that could lead to an escalation of violence. Opening a reliable channel for dispute management would lay the groundwork for a future formal regional security architecture.

2) **Initiate efforts to resolve the Persian Gulf crisis diplomatically.**

The United States should open channels of communication with all sides in the dispute, including Iran, to address whether any coordinated action is possible to improve collective security in the region. Substantial U.S. military presence in the region, in addition to the effectiveness of previous sanctions, provide enormous leverage that neither the GCC countries nor Iran can bring to the table. The longer the dispute endures, the greater the division between Qatar and the GCC grows,

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increasing the likelihood of an escalation of conflict in the Gulf. It is in U.S. national interests to prevent Qatar from drifting too far into Iran’s sphere of influence.

**AFGHANISTAN**

The United States and Iran share the following overarching objectives in Afghanistan: 1) prevent the Taliban from regaining control of the country; 2) address conditions in Afghanistan that make it a safe haven for terrorist networks; and 3) counter the narcotics trade that provides the Taliban with its largest source of funding and fuels the drug epidemic in Iran. Both countries hope to achieve these goals by supporting economic reconstruction and ensuring a stable and effective Afghan government. Although U.S. and Iranian interests in Afghanistan are largely compatible, strained relations between Washington and Tehran have precluded long-term cooperation.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan is in its seventeenth year with no foreseeable end. In August 2017, the Trump administration released its South Asia strategy, which neither mentioned a timeline for withdrawal nor acknowledged the key role Iran plays in the country.8 Instead, the strategy focuses on the role of Pakistan and its tacit support for the Haqqani Network branch of the Afghan Taliban. While adding 4,000 U.S. troops to increase the capacity of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the South Asia strategy minimizes the need for cooperation in the region. Given the convergence of U.S.-Iranian interests in Afghanistan, U.S. strategy towards South Asia cannot neglect the role of Iran in its broader strategic calculus.

Iran’s cultural, political, and economic ties to Afghanistan enable it to exert considerable influence over its eastern neighbor. The Persian Empire once ruled large parts of Afghanistan, including the major city of Herat near the Afghan-Iranian border, where Iran still seeks to maintain influence.

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Iran is Afghanistan’s largest trading partner; non-oil export trade between the two countries amounts to $1.8 billion annually, and Iran invested $75 million to finance the Iran-Herat railway. It also exercises influence through the building of schools, roads, and hospitals, particularly in Afghanistan’s western regions. Moreover, 15 percent of Afghans are Shia Muslims, and one of Afghanistan’s main languages, Dari, is a dialect of Persian.\(^9\)

Iran’s long, porous border with Afghanistan has turned it into a transit hub for heroin and other illicit drugs flowing into the Middle East and Europe. Despite 12,000 border guards and a $1 billion annual budget for anti-narcotics efforts, Iran struggles to control the inflow of opium from Afghanistan.\(^10\) Additionally, Iran and Afghanistan have a long history of disputes over water, particularly regarding the flow of the Helmand River, which Iran’s drought-prone eastern regions rely on. Iran perceives dam projects designed to boost Afghanistan’s agricultural sector as a direct threat to its interests. This has led Iran to support Taliban insurgents to prevent the construction of dams that would limit its access to water.\(^11\) As the recent protests in Iran demonstrate, demographic pressure and economic distress caused in large part by drought in rural areas are salient issues today. Thus, Iran must determine how its dependence on water from Afghanistan weighs into its broader interest of supporting the country’s economic development.

In terms of security, Iran has a complicated relationship with the Taliban, an extremist Sunni group that has actively targeted the Afghan Shia minority.\(^12\) Thus, Iran was eager to cooperate with the U.S. effort to oust the Taliban and install a more favorable government after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Iran cooperated with the United States by providing military support and sharing intelligence. At the December 2001 Bonn Conference, where the international community met to

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\(^12\) Mohsen Milani, “Iran and Afghanistan,” The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, October 5, 2010. iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan.
discuss the future of the Afghan government, Iran persuaded the Sunni Afghan Northern Alliance to support a democratic national government backed by the United States, with Hamid Karzai as president. However, after President George W. Bush declared Iran part of the “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, cooperation between the United States and Iran came to an effective end. The United States failed to take advantage of this opportunity to ease tensions with Iran and work together on common interests in Afghanistan.

Iran perceives the indefinite presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan through a hostile lens. As Afghanistan’s security situation worsens and the Taliban regains direct control or influence over more territory, Iran is hedging its bets by supporting the Taliban. The rise of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has also motivated Iran to back the Taliban with funding and weapons. As corruption and political in-fighting plague the Afghan national government, Iran’s support for the Taliban maximizes its influence in the event that a power-sharing agreement is reached between the government and the Taliban. To change Iran’s opportunistic strategy of supporting the Taliban, the United States should consider Iran when formulating its South Asia strategy and look for ways to cooperate on mutual objectives. Through strategic engagement, the United States can maximize the constructive role Iran plays in Afghanistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) **Work with Iran on counter-narcotics efforts.**

The United States and Iran have a shared interest in countering drug smuggling. Cutting off this source of income would also dramatically weaken the Taliban and strengthen the central Afghan government.
2) Work with Iran on water security.

The United States should encourage Iran and Afghanistan to reach a sustainable agreement on the allocation of water resources so that tensions over access to water do not lead to greater instability or incentivize Iran to support the Taliban in hopes of securing a more favorable agreement. The United States could work alongside the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish a water-usage system.

IRAQ

The extent of Iranian military, diplomatic, and economic engagement in Iraq necessitates calculated U.S. engagement. Iraq is a strategically vital country. The thousands of American lives lost during the Iraq War—as well as the vast resources and U.S. taxpayer dollars expended on rebuilding Iraqi infrastructure and political, military, and security institutions since the 2003 invasion—merit continued commitment to securing a stable Iraq. However, Iranian interference in Iraqi elections and support for Shia militias undermines the integrity of the Iraqi state.

The United States and Iran both want to see a unified, stable Iraq. However, Iran’s interests in Iraq center on preventing the development of a hostile neighbor, akin to Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime, capable of threatening Iran’s territorial integrity. Iran hopes to maintain influence over Iraqi reconstruction efforts to ensure the development of a strong central government capable of preserving Iraq’s borders and preventing the spread of Sunni radical extremism. Iran aims to prevent Iraq from invading it ever again. Iran also has a vested interest in ensuring the development of a malleable central government that is more amenable to Iranian interests over those of its regional adversaries: the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Finally, Iran seeks to build on the success of its Iraqi Shia militias, collectively called the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in defeating ISIL. This will enable it to draw Iraq into the “axis of resistance”—which includes Iran,
Hezbollah, Syria, and Hamas—focused on countering U.S. and Israeli influence in the region. The United States should push back against Iranian attempts to draw Iraq into its “axis of resistance” by supporting Iraqi sovereignty and promoting Iraqi nationalism over sectarianism. Iran relies on sectarianism to recruit Shia Iraqis into its paramilitary units in Iraq, so the United States should work to alleviate sectarian tensions, cultivate Iraqi unity under a strong representative government. This will reduce Iran’s leverage in Iraqi political and security affairs.

Another area where Iranian and U.S. interests in Iraq converge is the fight against ISIL and radical Sunni extremism. Both the United States and Iran have a vested interest in stabilizing Iraq as a national security measure to bolster counterterrorism efforts in the region. The rise of ISIL in 2014 posed a significant threat to U.S. interests in the region, including the safety of U.S. and European military and diplomatic personnel. Despite its diminished power and scope, ISIL still poses a threat to Iraq’s territorial integrity—a key security interest for both Iran and the United States. Iran wants a stable Iraq that can help protect its shared border, trade, and religious tourism between the two countries.

In December 2017, the Pentagon announced that the United States has 5,200 troops on the ground in Iraq, although that number is trending downward. Moreover, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) recently pledged to expand its military training mission in Iraq. U.S. and international military involvement should be framed as support for the central Iraqi government, and its territorial integrity and security, rather than as an imposition of foreign interests in the region. The perception of the latter stokes public support for Iranian-backed political candidates and militias. Therefore, a strong and stable Iraqi central government and security apparatus

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supported by U.S. and NATO forces is necessary to counter Iranian attempts to draw Iraq into its axis of resistance.

Iraq is scheduled to have a parliamentary election on May 12, 2018. The results will have major implications for the country’s political trajectory. It is uncertain whether Haider al-Abadi will maintain his position as prime minister or if cross-sectarian factions and new political players can succeed in Iraq’s nascent democracy. The proliferation of cross-sectarian coalitions weakens Iran’s influence in Iraqi politics, traditionally expressed through consolidated Shia parliamentary lists. It is a positive sign that cross-sectarian and reform-oriented parties are emerging, but the results of the upcoming election will indicate whether this change is permanent.19

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) **Maintain U.S. troop presence in Iraq in an advisory role.**
The United States should maintain troops in Iraq to advise, train, and strengthen the Iraqi Armed Forces, alongside current NATO forces. It should not impose a hard timeline for withdrawal.

2) **Maintain channels of communication with all potential candidates in the May 2018 election.**
The United States should foster good relations with all legitimate candidates and coalitions in Iraq’s upcoming May 2018 elections to avoid the appearance of favoritism. It is vital that the United States avoid explicitly advocating for the reelection of Prime Minister Abadi. Washington should voice support for free and fair elections, restoration of the rule of law, and strong Iraqi political and security institutions. Additionally, the United States should stay engaged after the

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elections to support the formation of a newly-elected government, and to prevent Iran from undermining the outcome.

3) **Encourage allies to invest in Iraqi reconstruction aid.**
Consistent with the principles outlined in the “Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq” (SFA), the United States should encourage regional allies such as Jordan, Turkey, and the GCC countries to invest more in Iraqi reconstruction aid.\(^\text{20}\)

4) **Encourage diplomatic reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Arab world.**
The Trump administration should leverage its close relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to encourage him to engage in reconciliation efforts with Iraq. Relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia deteriorated after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and have never fully recovered. The restoration of strong diplomatic ties between Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Sunni world would mean that Iran would need to expend more resources to effectively influence Iraq, thus limiting Tehran’s ability to work against U.S. interests in the country.

**SYRIA**

Syria serves as the geopolitical lynchpin for Iranian influence in the Levant and the wider Arab world. Iran views its engagement in Syria as primarily defensive, on the premise that the best defense is a good offense. Officials in Tehran decided to take the fight to Syria instead of waiting for the fight to reach Iran’s borders. Moreover, military engagement in Syria is seen as a way to ward off a conflict deliberately created to weaken the Islamic Republic; some foreign policy

analysts believe that Iran sees itself as locked in a zero-sum contest with the United States for influence in the region.\textsuperscript{21} Iran’s sense of stability requires it to consolidate its gains and use that leverage to persuade the United States to pull back from its role as the primary power broker in the region.

Iran has several goals in Syria. First, according to a top Iranian official, Iran seeks a unified Syria within its current borders and good relations with its neighbors.\textsuperscript{22} Second, Tehran considers a friendly Syrian government essential for maintenance of its land bridge to the Mediterranean, which will support the flow of arms and aid to Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah provides Tehran with a means of projecting influence in the Levant, and possesses hundreds of thousands of rockets aimed directly at Israel, a strong deterrent against potential Israeli aggression. In short, Syria represents the “golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel.”\textsuperscript{23} Third, Iran wants to combat ISIL and other regional terrorist groups in Syria. Tehran blames the United States for the rise of ISIL and other Sunni radical extremist groups, seeing itself as a victim of conspiracy and regional sectarianism.\textsuperscript{24} In June 2017, ISIL launched symbolic attacks on Iran’s parliament and the shrine to Ayatollah Khomeini, which left seventeen dead.\textsuperscript{25} Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that Iranian forces must fight these radical groups abroad, so they are no longer capable of launching attacks inside Iran: “If [ISIL] were not stopped, we would have to fight them in Kermanshah and Hamadan (provinces in western Iran).”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} Hillel Fradkin, “Iran's Land Bridge: Countering a Growing Influence in the Middle East,” event at The Hudson Institute, September 29, 2017.


\textsuperscript{23} Suzanne Maloney, “What’s next for the war(s) in Syria?” event at Brookings Institution, March 23, 2018.


Both the United States and Iran want a unified and stable Syria at peace with its neighbors. For the United States and its allies that includes Israel, whose security is of paramount importance. Iranian shipments of weapons and supplies to Hezbollah, as well as the construction of forward military bases, weapons depots, and a potential naval port, increase the likelihood of Israeli-Iranian conflict. This would severely destabilize the entire region, drawing major regional powers into open conflict. This outcome must be prevented.

A prolonged military conflict with Iranian-backed proxies in Syria would fuel sectarianism and terrorism by attracting additional fighters motivated to counter U.S. influence in the region. Therefore, reducing tensions and developing a realistic dialogue to end the civil war is in both U.S. and Iranian interests. At this point, the situation in Syria cannot be resolved without taking Iran’s interests into account. While the United States and Iran diverge on whether Assad should remain in power, both countries recognize that the future governance structure of Syria will likely include power-sharing agreements and political guarantees for all involved parties.

Finally, the United States has a vital interest in preventing the proliferation of chemical weapons and other WMD. The erosion of norms against chemical warfare undermines a liberal rules-based international order, and will inevitably endanger U.S. citizens and military personnel around the world. The United States and its allies have a vital interest in enacting harsh punishments for the use of these weapons.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1) **Convey clear red lines on Iranian activity in southwestern Syria.**

The United States should oppose Iran’s cultivation of southwestern Syria as a base for Hezbollah and for future military attacks inside Israeli territory. The United States should express to Iran that forward military bases, a naval port, and increased supplies of rockets past a certain point all constitute violations of U.S. and Israeli red lines, and that the United States is willing to use coercion, including sanctions and military force, to protect its partners.
The Trump administration should convey willingness to act unilaterally against Iranian assets threatening U.S. personnel in Syria.

2) **Impose sanctions on Iran for its support of the Assad regime and complicity in chemical weapons use.**
Washington should coordinate with its allies, including Europe, Japan, India, and South Korea—some of which are Iran’s largest trading partners—to levy multilateral sanctions in response to Iranian behavior in Syria. President Obama stated in 2015 that imposing sanctions on the Islamic Republic for “nonnuclear reasons” was permissible under the JCPOA, clearing the way for this course of action.

3) **Promote economic reconstruction.**
The United States and its allies should increase economic aid and security assurances for autonomous, liberated areas in Syria. However, all funds must be withheld from the Syrian government until a political settlement is reached in which Assad respects ceasefires, allows humanitarian aid, and ultimately relinquishes the presidency. An international peacekeeping mission may be necessary to patrol buffer zones between liberated and government-controlled territory.

4) **Negotiate a realistic political end-state in Syria with other major players.**
The United States must accept the reality that Assad will have major influence in the political make-up of post-conflict Syria. The United States should use its leverage to negotiate an end to the civil war, and develop a governance model for a unified Syria that contains guarantees for all involved parties, including Iran, Russia, and Turkey.
THE JCPOA: U.S. PARTICIPATION OR WITHDRAWAL?

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a major step forward for international security and nonproliferation. It brought together the E3/EU+3 (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia) and Iran in a historic deal. The JCPOA implemented caps and monitoring provisions on Iran’s nuclear enrichment program and lifted sanctions, unfroze assets, and opened Iran to foreign investment.

A key indicator of the trajectory of U.S.-Iran relations is the future of U.S. participation in the JCPOA. Critics of the deal doubt that it will prevent Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon in the long-term. President Trump questions the strength of the deal’s provisions and has vowed to withdraw the United States if certain issues are not addressed. However, if the United States withdraws from the JCPOA, U.S.-Iran relations will deteriorate and tensions will escalate. The United States also risks international isolation, as the rest of the E3/EU+3 does not want to lose the restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program and hopes to continue investing in the Iranian market. It is in the interests of U.S. policymakers to address President Trump’s concerns in order to keep the United States in the JCPOA.

CONDITIONS FOR U.S. PARTICIPATION

On January 12, 2018, President Trump stated, “Despite my strong inclination, I have not yet withdrawn the United States from the Iran nuclear deal. Instead, I have outlined two possible pathways forward: either fix the deal’s disastrous flaws, or the United States will withdraw.”

May 12, 2018, President Trump will announce whether he will waive or reimpose U.S. sanctions on Iran’s nuclear program, as required by U.S. law.

There are several aspects of the JCPOA that President Trump wants to fix. First, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors must have access to all potential enrichment sites in perpetuity, in spite of Iranian threats to reserve the right to prevent access to military sites. Second, while the JCPOA commits Iran to never developing a nuclear weapon, President Trump is concerned that the deal’s plan to allow restrictions on Iran’s enrichment capacity and enriched uranium stockpiles to lapse after ten and 15 years respectively—“sunset provisions”—will potentially compromise this goal. Third, President Trump would also like to take steps to address the exclusion of ballistic missiles from the JCPOA, given their potential to serve as a delivery system for nuclear weapons. The President said a decision for the United States to remain in the deal would rest on: 1) the IAEA’s ability to exercise full inspection rights; 2) whether the United States and its European allies develop a supplemental agreement to take action against Iran in the event it takes steps to put Iran within closer reach of developing a nuclear weapon; 3) effective measures against Iran’s ballistic missile program; and 4) a broader agreement to take action against Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region.

All of these measures could potentially put the survival of the JCPOA in serious doubt. A provocative IAEA challenge inspection at a military site could prompt Iranian hardliners to refuse cooperation, setting into motion a process to declare Iran in violation of the deal, ultimately increasing pressure that would likely lead to its collapse. Attempting such an inspection in the absence of any information indicating illicit activity at a military site would thus risk ending verified restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program without any concrete indication that Iran was violating the deal. Furthermore, a supplemental agreement that commits the United States and the Europeans to act against Iran’s expansion of enrichment and enriched uranium stockpile, measures which the JCPOA permits, will likely cause Iran to charge the United States and the Europeans with violating their commitments, risking Iran’s withdrawal. A new agreement between the United States and its European allies to enhance penalties on Iran for its ballistic missile activity and
destabilizing behavior is less problematic. Despite Tehran’s objections to the contrary, the United States has already imposed similar measures on Iran under both the Obama and Trump administrations without any apparent consequences for Iran’s broader implementation of the deal.

CONCERNS WITH THE JCPOA

Inspection and Verification Regime

According to IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano, the world’s most robust inspection and verification regime is already in place in Iran and the agency has access to all locations that it needs to visit. While the IAEA is not concerned about its access to civilian sites for inspection, its

Source: IAEA

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ability to access military sites has not been publicly verified because of Iran’s insistence that any such access take place only with the approval of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council. However, there were cases in the past during Iran’s previous cooperation with the IAEA when inspectors were allowed access to some military facilities. It would be worth exploring, out of the glare of international publicity, whether the IAEA could get to work immediately on revisiting military sites to test the concept of universal access within Iran, while maintaining the IAEA’s commitment to seek immediate access to any site where the United States or its allies believe illicit activity is taking place.

Sunset Provisions

The president’s concern about Iran’s ability to obtain a nuclear weapon in the future stems from the deal’s sunset clauses. Under the JCPOA, Iran can, without limits, expand its centrifuge capabilities after ten years and increase its low enriched uranium stockpile after 15. Critics fear that Iran could engage in nuclear weapons development activities that could decrease its breakout time, in violation of JCPOA Annex 1, Section T.
President Trump’s demand that Iran never be able to obtain a nuclear weapon is already covered under the JCPOA, which stipulates Iran is not allowed to develop nuclear weapons. After the deal’s sunset clauses expire, Iran will still be obligated to maintain its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in reference to Iran’s Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the Additional Protocol inspection regime. Both provisions include stopgap measures to ensure that Iran’s nuclear program does not divert nuclear material from civil to military use. As a result, the prohibitions on Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon do not expire, as exhibited in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration of Select Nuclear-Related Provisions</th>
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<td><strong>Source</strong>: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University</td>
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In the interest of keeping the current restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program intact, there is space for the United States and its European allies to develop a plan to respond harshly if Iran expands its enrichment activity and stockpiles inconsistent with peaceful nuclear activity after the “sunset” restrictions lapse—provided Iran continues to accrue benefits under the deal in the meantime.
Ballistic Missile Concerns

According to former UN weapons inspector Michael Elleman, Iran maintains the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenal in the region.\(^29\) Iran’s ballistic missile program is problematic because Tehran possesses multiple missiles that could theoretically deliver a nuclear payload. So far, Iran’s arsenal contains missiles that can reach targets throughout the Persian Gulf, all of the Levant, Israel, Turkey, and parts of Southern Europe.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) not only endorsed the JCPOA, but attempted to address Iran’s ballistic missile program through UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 2231, which gave broad endorsement to the JCPOA. The resolution calls on Iran to refrain from developing ballistic missiles “designed to be capable” of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology, for eight years.\(^30\) President Trump argues that Iran’s missile tests defy UNSCR 2231, and that in order for the United States to remain in the deal, Congress must pass legislation signifying that the United States considers Iran’s long range missile and nuclear weapon program to be inextricably linked to international efforts to prevent Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon. However, Iran—with support from Russia and China—argues that its missile program does not violate the resolution. Tehran claims that its stated commitment to not develop nuclear weapons already prohibits it from intentionally designing missiles capable of carrying them.


RECOMMENDATIONS

1) **Discreetly work to expand IAEA inspections.**
The United States should immediately work with its allies to explore options for expanding IAEA inspections within Iran, including military sites visited in the past, to establish precedent for universality of IAEA access within Iran. This should be undertaken discreetly to avoid inflaming Iranian hardliners.

2) **Negotiate a supplemental deal with the E3.**
The United States and the E3 should continue discussions and come to agreement with the full EU on how to react to a rapid enlargement of Iran’s nuclear program after the expiration of “sunset” provisions in ways inconsistent with a peaceful nuclear program, or which move Iran closer to the acquisition of a nuclear weapon. Such an agreement should underscore the U.S.-E3 commitment to continued implementation of the deal in the meantime, to encourage Iran’s continuing compliance with existing strict restrictions in the deal.
3) **Enact legislation to penalize noncompliance and strengthen measures on missiles.**

To adequately address President Trump’s concerns, U.S. policymakers should support congressional legislation that strengthens the ability to punish Iranian non-compliance. Legislation should include a commitment to reimpose sanctions if Iran expands enrichment or exceeds stockpile restrictions under the JCPOA. This legislation should also address concerns about Iran’s missile program with new sanctions authority, ideally enacted with European allies and other like-minded states.

**THE JCPOA POST-U.S. WITHDRAWAL**

If Washington is unable to enact legislation and cement a supplemental agreement with European partners prior to the May 12 deadline, President Trump vowed that he will not extend waivers on nuclear-related sanctions against Iran and will withdraw the United States from the JCPOA. The United States needs to prepare for the numerous ramifications of withdrawal.

*Outcome 1: The JCPOA Survives*

The JCPOA is likely to survive a U.S. withdrawal, at least in the short term. The remaining parties understand it would be difficult to negotiate a new deal that encompasses similarly comprehensive economic, political, and security components. The rest of the E3/EU+3 countries do not want to lose the nuclear program provisions and hope to continue investing in Iran. Tehran desperately wants economic rejuvenation, increased foreign investment, and further integration into the global economy.

The survival of the JCPOA would force the international community to adjust to the new arrangement and allow it to discern which provisions of the deal are sustainable without U.S. involvement. Continued Iranian compliance with the deal’s nuclear provisions is preferable to an increase in its enrichment activities. If the JCPOA fails, there would be little room for negotiation
with Iran on its non-nuclear activities because the parties would be mired in distrust, disappointment, and a loss of faith. The JCPOA’s survival without the United States would preserve some degree of cooperation and trust between the remaining parties, which would be critical for future discussions on Iran’s non-nuclear activities. The deal’s survival would also allow for the possibility of a U.S. return to the agreement at some point in the future. It is important to continue Iran’s integration into the international financial and political systems because this encourages Tehran to act responsibly and incentivizes it to be a status quo player in the international community. While Iran continues its regionally destabilizing activities in spite of the JCPOA, the more Tehran integrates into the international system, the greater the economic and political leverage the UNSC and international community will possess. This leverage will be important if Iran dangerously accelerates its nuclear enrichment program in the future.

However, upon withdrawal, the United States would likely reapply unilateral and secondary nuclear-related sanctions on Iran. Secondary sanctions would threaten European companies’ access to the U.S. market, which could deter their investment plans. Major European companies, such as Total, which signed a $5 billion deal in July 2017 to develop Phase 11 of the South Pars offshore gas field, want to pursue investment opportunities in Iran. Many are already preparing for a U.S. withdrawal. For example, Total will request an individual waiver if Washington imposes secondary sanctions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Accommodate European business interests in Iran.
Washington should accommodate European business interests in Iran if it helps maintain Tehran’s commitment to the JCPOA nuclear provisions. The United States could allow previously approved, but currently held up, deals between European companies and Iran to go through without incurring financial penalties. The United States could limit the severity of secondary sanctions and exclude European countries, companies, or industries. In the short term, the EU is unlikely to resist U.S. secondary sanctions due to the unpredictability of the Trump administration. Eventually, however, the EU could become fed up with the United States and begin to push back with retaliatory economic measures. While U.S. unilateral and secondary sanctions would hurt Iran and influence the EU, they will not match the impact of past multilateral efforts.33

2) Limit the severity of secondary sanctions.
The United States should limit the severity of unilateral and secondary sanctions to increase the likelihood that the deal will survive post-withdrawal. President Trump could make a political statement through withdrawal, thus fulfilling a major campaign promise, and still levy limited economic pain on Iranian leaders through new sanctions. The United States would continue to reap the benefits of the international security and nonproliferation provisions of the JCPOA, while minimizing the chance of a serious fallout with European allies.

3) Address ballistic missile concerns.
Regardless of whether Washington leaves the deal, the Trump administration should take steps to address Iran’s development of ballistic missiles, which threatens to further destabilize the region, independently from the JCPOA. The United States could levy sanctions in coordination with European allies or increase the intensity of the unilateral sanctions currently in place (though a

U.S. withdrawal from the deal could limit European enthusiasm to cooperate with the U.S. in punishing other Iranian malign activity).

**Outcome 2: The JCPOA Does Not Survive**

The less likely outcome of U.S. withdrawal is that the JCPOA falls apart. Iran claims it has not seen the economic relief it was promised under the deal, and harsh U.S. secondary and unilateral sanctions could strengthen hardliners’ argument that Iran should exit the JCPOA. Aggressive U.S. sanctions could further reduce Iran’s economic gains, which might make the deal politically untenable in Tehran. If it leaves the deal, Iran will likely increase its enrichment activity; the international response would depend on the degree of the increase. Iran would likely increase its enrichment above the JCPOA’s 3.67 percent and 300 kilogram limits slowly, so as not to alarm the international community. Iran wants to drive a wedge between the United States and its partners, and Tehran would lose leverage over Washington if it increased its enrichment activity significantly.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1) **Monitor the degree of Iranian enrichment activity.**

If Iran slowly increases its enrichment activity above JCPOA caps, the United States should continue with the unilateral or secondary sanctions it had in place pre-U.S. withdrawal, but resist aggressive or coercive military actions unless the scope of enrichment increases significantly.

2) **Take coercive economic and military action if significant enrichment activity is detected.**

If Iran quickly and drastically increases its enrichment activity, Washington should use coercive economic and military means to push back. It should pursue severe multilateral sanctions through a UNSCR, and, if this is not possible, it should levy heavy unilateral and secondary sanctions. The United States should also step up its military and naval presence in the Persian Gulf, conduct
expanded military exercises with partners, and increase interdictions of Iranian arms exports. These measures would show Iran that the United States and its allies will not tolerate a return to pre-JCPOA levels of enrichment, because the international and regional security risks of a short breakout time threaten a devastating conflict that would draw in the United States.

It is quite common for U.S. politicians, academics, and members of the public to call for American-led regime change in Iran. This is based on Iran’s hostility to Israel, its support for Hezbollah and other proxy militia forces, its support for terrorism, its past nuclear and current missile programs, and its vocal condemnations of the United States and the West. While Iran undoubtedly poses a threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, foreign-induced regime change is not a realistic solution for combating Iran’s influence. The United States cannot know what the outcome of this policy response would be or what would replace the current political system. Externally imposed institutions would not be seen as legitimate by the Iranian people, and the United States cannot, in good conscience, support regime change in a way that may result in extreme violence or a failed state.

There is no fully-formed, democratic, U.S.-friendly movement that the United States can support within Iran, and Washington is not prepared to commit itself to long-term support of a destabilized Iran or to involve itself in an Iranian civil war. Unlike in Iraq, regime change would not only require toppling the Supreme Leader, but also eradicating the power of the IRGC—likely an impossible task without a full-scale invasion. In addition, instigating regime change from within by attempting to provide military support to disenfranchised minority groups would most likely fail, as none of Iran’s minority groups are large enough to take on the government. U.S. calls for regime change only increase Iranian government repression, decrease respect for human rights, strengthen the position of the Supreme Leader and conservative hardliners, and decrease opportunities for cooperation on shared national interests.

The Iranian people have an exceptionally strong sense of national and cultural pride, as well as a deep aversion to foreign interference. This aversion is based on the carving up of the Persian empire and subsequent draining of oil revenues by foreign powers; the 1953 UK- and U.S.-backed coup which overthrew Iran’s democratically-elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh; the status of forces agreement signed in 1964, which gave diplomatic immunity to U.S. troops stationed in Iran; the trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, during which time few countries supported Iran;
and fear and uncertainty around being encircled by U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fact that most Iranians would object to outside interference against their government is a boon to regime stability and makes foreign-led regime change even less likely to be viewed as legitimate.

Overall, the system of government in Iran appears to be very stable. While there are a number of vulnerabilities, particularly economic mismanagement and increased awareness of entrenched elite interests, Iranians do not necessarily oppose the system in general. Rather, they object to corruption and the government’s increased interference in their social and Internet lives. The government has a tight hold on many of the tools necessary for social control, meaning it can repress large-scale protest movements before they become destabilizing. But it is clear that the gulf between the people and the government is only getting larger. Without reform, there is long-term potential for the development of spontaneous, overwhelming protests that cannot be so easily repressed. The United States has many alternatives to regime change that can help empower Iranian civil society to decide its country’s future.

**U.S.-Iranian Public Diplomacy**

One alternative method to outright regime change is to push for evolutionary change inside Iran through strategic public diplomacy. The United States can discreetly utilize specific elements in the public diplomacy toolbox to support the organic evolutionary changes already occurring within Iranian society and government in order to undermine the regime and pursue U.S. policy objectives.
The Public Diplomacy Toolbox

1) **Cultural and Academic Exchanges:** U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations can engage in cultural and academic exchanges to build mutual good will and reduce tension. Such exchanges carry relatively little risk or cost but could deliver tangible benefits to the United States and Iran by fostering an environment of cooperation in which other bilateral issues can be negotiated. Issues like Iran’s nuclear and missile programs will take years to fully resolve, and cultural diplomacy will be vital to building and sustaining momentum toward a normal, productive relationship. Scientific exchanges would encourage democratic processes within Iran by subtly undermining the repressive regime. They can be leveraged to deliver a subversive message to the Iranian people without attracting negative coverage or blowback from government hardliners. For example, programs to make Iranian schools earthquake-resistant or deliver clean water to village residents send the message that the Iranian government is incapable of providing basic services or safety for its citizens. It signals that hardline ideology does not have answers for immediate problems faced by ordinary people, and that it is focused on oppressing dissent and civil rights—not on helping its own citizens. In military parlance, this could be termed “influence operations.” Furthermore, exemptions in the travel ban should be made for Iranian participants in cultural and academic exchanges.

2) **Internet Access:** The Iranian government cracked down hard on recent protests by increasing Internet repression and censorship, making it hard for citizens to mobilize and participate. The Trump administration should lift sanctions and expand the distribution of special U.S. government-issued licenses to permit technology companies to sell Iranian users communication apps and other technology that would enable protestors to more effectively organize and evade government restrictions.

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3) **Traditional and Nontraditional Media:** Underpinning U.S. public diplomacy efforts are programs relying on traditional media, like radio and television channels, as well on social media to broadcast targeted messages to foreign audiences. Given Iranians’ ability to access foreign websites, the Trump administration should use traditional and nontraditional media to communicate strategic messages that further U.S. national interests. This would entail rhetorically supporting Internet, media, and social freedom in Iran. If the language of universal human rights does not resonate, the U.S. should highlight specific government abuses, such as mistreatment of female political prisoners and arrests of environmental activists.

4) **Sports Diplomacy:** Sports diplomacy between the United States and Iran has a long and successful history. The administration should reinvigorate sports diplomacy to show off the friendly dynamism of American society to diminish Iranian citizens’ fear of the United States. These programs have the potential to amplify the U.S. message to a wide audience within Iran. And they signal that both sides are willing to cooperate on certain issues, which can be leveraged for more substantial initiatives.

**Challenges**

However, several things could happen in the near future that would set back U.S.-Iranian relations significantly. These include the collapse of the JCPOA, an end to the Syria conflict on terms favorable to Iran, war between Israel and Hezbollah, or a major ISIL offensive in western Iran. This would likely obstruct U.S. public diplomacy efforts to encourage change within Iran. Additionally, the success of cultural, academic, and scientific exchanges depends on Iranian receptiveness. Distrust of the United States, which reached an all-time low during President Obama’s administration, has ratcheted up since President Trump took office. Of particular concern to Iranians is the possibility that the United States will, in their view, renege on its commitments under the JCPOA. Iranian government officials have expressed a reluctance to conduct any sort of exchanges as long as the fate of the JCPOA is in question--and if the United States withdraws completely, they may refuse to allow Iranian students, scholars, or athletes to travel to the U.S. or
grant visas to Americans for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, public diplomacy is not a cure-all, particularly when the U.S. and Iranian governments disagree over critical issues like militias in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; Iranian support for Houthi rebels in Yemen; and Iran’s continuing ballistic missile program. However, public diplomacy is necessary to “preserve the channels of communication that are critical to deescalating the tensions likely to arise from the toxic combination of hawkish voices gaining prominence in Washington…and hardline pushback in Tehran.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) **Refrain from supporting regime change through political or military means.**

Iran does pose a threat to American interests in the Middle East, but regime change is not the answer. There is no democratic, U.S.-friendly movement in place to replace the current regime and the United States is not prepared to commit the time and resources it would take to promote regime change from without.

2) **Ensure Iran is better integrated into the global economy and promote private sector development as long as it continues to meet its obligations under the JCPOA.**

Conservative forces, particularly the IRGC, can preserve their power best in a closed system, as demonstrated by the IRGC’s consolidation of control over the economy at the height of international sanctions. The United States could also encourage European businesses to increase trade with and foreign direct investment in Iran, to reduce industry dominance by the IRGC and its affiliates.

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3) **Lift the travel ban on Iranian citizens or create an exception for individuals participating in State Department exchange programs.**

The exception should exclude the requirement to show proof of undue hardship. This would enable the resumption of sports diplomacy programs, as well as cultural and academic exchanges.

4) **Increase funding to support exchanges.**

It costs about $20,000 to bring one Iranian to the United States and to cover one month’s expenses.\(^{38}\) The State Department should receive more funding for the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and similar people-to-people initiatives with Iran.

5) **Expedite the process for Iranians to obtain U.S. visas if traveling on an official exchange.**

6) **Lift sanctions on communication apps and other technology.**

The United States should issue a general license that permits companies to distribute communications technology products inside Iran without fear of being fined for violating sanctions. This will enable protestors to more effectively organize and evade government censorship.

7) **Use traditional and nontraditional media to communicate strategic messages that further U.S. national interests.**

These messages should promote respect for Iran and Islam; highlight the costs to average Iranians of their government’s military adventurism in the region; publicize international pressure and the ongoing work of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for Iran to clean up corruption; emphasize specific human rights abuses by the government that many Iranians disagree with, such as

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as mistreatment of female political prisoners and the arrests of environmental activists; and
spotlight the contribution of the U.S. military to the promotion of common interests with Iran in
the region, such as providing security to the Afghan government and eliminating spaces in Iraq
and Syria from which ISIL could stage attacks on Iran.
Each of the policy recommendations in this report are interrelated. U.S. policy in one issue area can lead to an Iranian response in another area. A more nuanced strategy considers that pressure and engagement are not mutually exclusive foreign policy tools, but are essential complements to one another. This report advocates for the adoption of the following overarching strategy vis-à-vis Iran:

**Promote avenues for cooperation and engagement where possible.**

**Apply pressure when necessary.**

The following list of consolidated recommendations summarizes key elements of this strategy:

1) Take steps to increase communication between Iran, the United States, and the Gulf states.

2) Initiate efforts to resolve the Persian Gulf crisis diplomatically.

3) Work with Iran on counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan.

4) Work with Iran on water security in Afghanistan.

5) Maintain U.S. troop presence in Iraq in an advisory role.

6) Maintain channels of communication with all potential candidates in Iraq’s May 2018 elections.

7) Encourage allies to invest in Iraqi reconstruction aid.

8) Encourage Iranian diplomatic reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Arab world.

9) Convey clear red lines on Iranian activity in southwestern Syria.

10) Impose sanctions on Iran for its support of the Assad regime and complicity in chemical weapons use.

11) Promote economic reconstruction in Syria.
13) Enact legislation to ensure Iranian compliance with the JCPOA.

14) Negotiate a supplemental deal with the E3/EU+3.

15) Accommodate European business interests in Iran.

16) Limit the severity of secondary sanctions.

17) Address concerns with Iran’s ballistic missile program.

18) Monitor the degree of Iranian enrichment activity.

19) Take coercive economic and military action if significant Iranian enrichment activity is detected.

20) Refrain from supporting regime change through political or military means.

21) Ensure Iran is better integrated into the global economy and promote private sector development as long as it continues to meet its obligations under the JCPOA.

22) Lift the travel ban on Iranian citizens or create an exception for individuals participating in State Department exchange programs.

23) Increase funding to support exchanges.

24) Expedite the process for Iranians to obtain U.S. visas if traveling on an official exchange.

25) Lift sanctions on communication apps and other technology.

26) Use traditional and nontraditional media to communicate strategic messages that further U.S. national interests.


