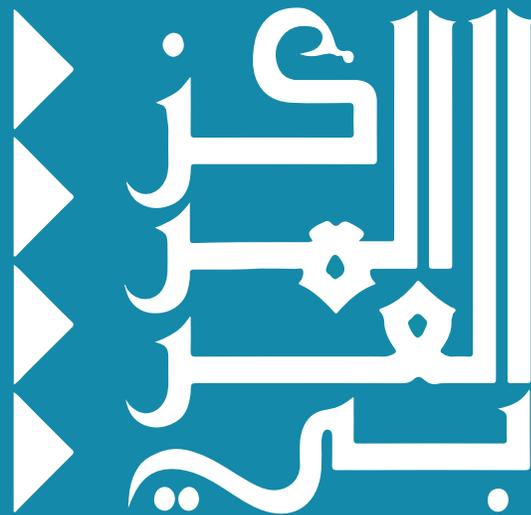


# Obstacles to President Trump's Options on Iran

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Almost two months into his presidency, Donald Trump has charted a clear path to tense relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is expected given candidate Trump's derisive attitude toward former President Barack Obama's overtures to Iran. But the stridency with which the Trump Administration is addressing Iranian challenges has, for all intents and purposes, put Iran, the Middle East, and the world at large on notice regarding a potential confrontation in the future.

The Iranians, moderates and hardliners alike, are no different in their visceral dislike of the new intruder on what passed for American-Iranian relations during the Obama Administration. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who has never minced words about his loathing of the United States, found that his opinion of the "Great Satan" was justified when President Trump was elected. After Trump imposed sanctions on 25 Iranian individuals and entities in February 2017 following Iran's missile tests, Khamenei sarcastically thanked him for exposing "the true face" of the United States. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shed his moderate garb and called the American president a "political novice" and warned him against tampering with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) dealing with Iran's nuclear program. The Iranian military conducted a number of missile tests and maritime maneuvers to send a message that Iran is not apprehensive about Trump's threats.

As the Trump Administration tries to put its foreign policy team together and the Rouhani Administration seeks another term in the June 2017 presidential elections, a number of issues and how they develop will determine the direction of current recriminations. The issues range from the fate of the JCPOA, to the diametrically opposed outcomes of the American and Iranian involvements in Syria and Iraq, to arranging a GCC-Israel alliance, to balancing Russia's views about the Middle East. Indeed, the Trump Administration will face a complicated set of options resulting from the dialectical relationships between these issues; they run the gamut from an ill-advised and full-throttled American plunge in the quicksand of the Middle East to a measured approach that best preserves American interests and peace in the region.

### **The Difficulties of Undoing the JCPOA**

President Trump ran his campaign on a platform berating the nuclear agreement with Iran as the worst deal ever negotiated. He has repeated his objection to it since his inauguration and pledged to reopen negotiations over its provisions. However, it is doubtful that the United States can do this without sacrificing its reputation and stature, weakening its relationship with the other signatories to the agreement, and opening the door for a possible and dangerous rollback of international legal standards, when the world seems to need them the most.

European signatories of the JCPOA – the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – are on record opposing any tampering with the agreement. Russia and China will not only reject any revisions but will refuse even to meet to discuss the prospects. The international community has codified the agreement in UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and committed the International Atomic Energy Agency to decades-long inspections and monitoring of Iranian nuclear facilities. In essence, the JCPOA has almost become a nonproliferation regime all on its own which will be emulated in the future whenever a state seeks to develop nuclear technology.

As the Trump Administration looks for ways to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, it finds that short of all-out war, it may not have an option but to accept the rationale that the Obama Administration internalized and popularized: that the JCPOA was the best possible outcome for the nuclear impasse. That Iran reaped the benefits from the lifting of international sanctions and used those benefits domestically and in support of proxy organizations to do its bidding is an unfortunate outcome that could not be prevented by the negotiators. But this should not obscure the fact that current American sanctions on Iran are almost as restrictive and arduous as international ones since they still limit its full access to financial markets and potential investors in the country's own markets. The Trump Administration might thus find its only solace in ensuring Iran's adherence to the JCPOA and enforcing existing sanctions, and possibly imposing others.

## **Parallel Paths in Syria and Iraq**

If American-Iranian relations in the age of Trump are to see dangerous friction, that would arguably be more likely where Iran tries to chart a course for its strategic dominance in the Arab Levant. The United States maintains a force of trainers and special operations personnel in Syria and has just deployed active-duty marines to the Syrian battlefield against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). About 5,000 American soldiers have been operating alongside the Iraqi army to defeat ISIL in the north of the country. It is hard to see how the US military's commitment to defeating the organization in the two countries will simply be followed by an orderly withdrawal once that mission is accomplished, given Iran's influence in Damascus and Baghdad and the potential strategic harm to American interests in the Levant.

From its side, the Islamic Republic of Iran has expended sizeable efforts and precious resources to assure a dominant role in Syria and Iraq, one it logically will not cede to a new American presence in Syria and a renewed role in Iraq. It has pushed its proxies, Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, to take part in military operations in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, and they are now assisting the Syrian army against ISIL positions in Syria. In Iraq, Iran's proxies, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), are participating in the fight in northern Iraq and, specifically, in Tal Afar on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Such involvement has the sole purpose of assuring an acceptable

foothold in the Baghdad-Damascus axis that would remain the pivotal strategic link with the Islamic Republic. As for Damascus and Bagdad themselves, Tehran has so far succeeded in assuring the dominance of allies and proxies, entities that any American involvement would be hard-pressed to control.

The Trump Administration thus has a complicated task in Syria and Iraq as two nodes of confrontation with Iran. In Syria, it faces an authoritarian regime suppressing a popular revolt with a Russian desire for a strategic foothold, a Turkish attempt at securing a pivotal role in the north of the country, a nascent Kurdish drive for self-rule and perhaps more, and a strident sectarian Iranian hegemony. In Iraq, Washington is dealing with a timid Iraqi government, led by Haider al-Abadi, that is linked with the Iranian-supported and directed Shiite PMF, a disenchanted Sunni constituency awaiting redress from years of post-war neglect, and a self-assured Kurdish autonomous region that may not feel responsible to oppose Iran's role. As the fight to defeat ISIL in the north of both countries intensifies and nears an end, the Trump Administration would do well to challenge Iran's political and paramilitary advantage with renewed vigor and commitment. At present, American diplomacy does not seem ready or effective in countering the status quo of Iran's omnipresence; thus the risks of military confrontations increase as ISIL gets closer to its demise.

### **The Gulf-Israel Consideration**

If Syria and Iraq are the unsure nodes in American relations with the Middle East, US relations with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel form the bedrock upon which American interests rest in the region. The GCC and Israel may also act as triggers that determine the degree to which future developments with the Islamic Republic may worsen. To be sure, and considering the complications of Syria and Iraq, American policy will, for the foreseeable future, depend on how the GCC and Israel fare amid an ever-challenging Iranian strategic overstretch.

To the GCC countries, during the presidential campaign President Trump represented a dark horse that could upend decades of a traditional American-Gulf alliance. But once elected, he began to look like the best guarantee for a belligerent stand on Iran. Since his inauguration, Trump has obliged with rhetoric, policy pronouncements, and actions that Gulf leaders see as proof that the United States is willing and able to finally commit to unwavering support that brooks no concessions on matters involving Iran. In addition, his continued pledges to supply the latest weapons systems, training, logistical support, and intelligence gathering point to long-term coordination; only this time it is under the rubric of challenging Iranian designs.

However, what might stand in the way of a clear understanding of what to do about Iran are the mixed messages and confusing stands that some Gulf countries are sending regarding Iran and their relationship with Washington. Indeed, all GCC countries have expressed support for the JCPOA and are relieved that a military confrontation with Iran was avoided. And yet, some in Saudi Arabia call for the overthrow of the Islamic regime in Tehran. Along with others, Saudi Arabia also was strangely absent in the debate about President Trump's travel ban against Muslims from six Muslim-majority countries, while the United Arab Emirates saw the move as justified and not as a Muslim ban.

As for Israel, President Trump has not deviated from longstanding commitments to support Israel. In fact, he has striven to appear more royal than the king by bending over backwards to accommodate a revisionist Israeli policy that smacks of total disregard of international law and norms and respect for Palestinian rights. The president even abandoned decades of American policy built on working for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and appointed David Friedman—an advocate for settlements and colonization—as US ambassador to Israel. While he tried to placate Palestinian and Arab concerns about American policy by inviting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the White House, his obvious sellout on what stood for American neutrality will never pass as a prescription for protecting American interests among Arab partners and allies.

On Iran, President Trump will try to harness the spirit of concern among Arabs and Israelis about Iran's behavior, which might encourage an Arab-Israeli front against the Islamic Republic. But in this he would most probably be mistaken. If the Arab world and Israel share antipathy toward Iran, it does not follow that they will rush into a military alliance to challenge it. Whatever the calculations behind the "outside-in" approach advocated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toward peace with the Palestinians—an approach he thinks will lead to Arab-Israeli cooperation on Iran—they remain stymied by Israeli intransigence on Palestinian rights.

### **Balancing the Kremlin's Views**

The outcome of American withdrawal from playing a decisive role in Syria has resulted in a number of actors, especially Russia, taking important decisions and actions. Subsequently, whatever the Trump Administration hopes to accomplish in standing up to Iran will necessarily have to address this geostrategic fact on the ground, despite obvious differences on Syria policy between Moscow and Tehran.

Here, there are many important issues to consider. First, while Russia may not want to allow a dominant, indeed challenging, Iranian role in Syria, it will delight in having the United States occupied with how to deal with the Islamic Republic's behavior, not only in Syria but also in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and around the Arabian Gulf. Second, Russia also benefits from Iran's challenge to the GCC since that can

increase its leverage with GCC leaders, who are always looking for ways to hedge against threats and seeking strategic relations with outside powers. In that case, Russia may feel emboldened and pivotal. Third, Russian-Israeli relations have since the start of Syria's civil war become a worrisome development to Israel's historical matron, the United States. If Russian President Vladimir Putin could assure Prime Minister Netanyahu of a fortuitous outcome in Syria that could sideline Iran's and Hezbollah's threats, Putin would undoubtedly become a benefactor and share the glory of de-escalating Israeli-Iranian tensions. Fourth, Russia is on record rejecting reconsideration of the JCPOA, on the one hand, and the Trump Administration's language on Iran as a terrorist state, on the other.

It is thus difficult to surmise that President Trump would find it easy to persuade President Putin to increase the pressure on Iran; indeed, Russia has sold the Islamic Republic advanced air-defense missile technology it now deploys. Whatever the differences between Russia and Iran on Syria, they remain close in cooperating to ensure the survival and strengthening of the Assad regime. And whatever mutual admiration was expressed over the last few months between Presidents Trump and Putin, their policy prescriptions and evaluations of potential repercussions may indeed be diametrically opposed. To Moscow, Iran is also a bargaining chip whose price is not whittled or easily gambled away on a whim to mollify an American president, one who may not necessarily know what he is asking for.

## De-Escalating Rhetoric

The rhetoric of the electoral campaign may have run away with President Trump, like it has with those who came before him. Iran appeared to be an easy case for decisive promises regarding its nuclear program and its policies and actions around the Middle East. But given the reality of the myriad complications facing a straightforward policy on the Islamic Republic, the Trump Administration may do well to soften its pronouncements while working diplomatically to build a case for limiting Tehran's influence around the region.

First, it is important for the preservation of the United States' reputation as a law-abiding international citizen to refrain from threats to re-negotiate or abandon the JCPOA. The refusal of other signatories to change the status quo and with the agreement becoming a United Nations resolution, issuing such threats is simply utter folly. Instead, it behooves the United States to work on strengthening the international regime governing the agreement and safeguarding its provisions in the interest of using it as a model for the future.

Second, Iran's troublesome behavior in the Middle East should be vigorously checked. American leadership must point the path forward to establish international mechanisms for addressing the challenges posed by missile tests, supporting non-state actors such as Hezbollah, and impeding freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf. The United States still has a set of unilateral sanctions that

could be used to get the message to Iran that international norms cannot be sacrificed.

Third, an important issue that the Iranian leadership exploits to its advantage is Israel's disregard for Palestinian human and national

rights, which is largely supported by the United States. As President Trump seeks to address the central issue of Middle East peace, he should be reminded that peace cannot be achieved, nor Iran de-fanged ideologically, so long as the question of Palestine persists.

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