

ISSUE BRIEF 03.23.18

Trump Policy in the Middle East: Iran

Joe Barnes, Bonner Means Baker Fellow

Robert Barron, Policy Assistant to the Baker Institute Director

BACKGROUND

The United States has had, to put it mildly, a turbulent relationship with Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While conflict—usually conducted through proxies—has waxed and waned over the years, each country has considered the other an adversary. Tehran has, in general, viewed the United States—the “Great Satan”—as unalterably opposed both to its Islamic revolutionary government and to recognizing Iran’s legitimate interests in the Persian Gulf. Washington, in turn, sees Iran both as a general threat to stability in the region and, more specifically, as a patron of terrorist groups, most notably Hezbollah and Hamas.

Over the past two decades, nuclear proliferation has been perhaps the foremost driver of U.S.–Iranian antagonism. During the administrations of Bill Clinton and, particularly, George W. Bush, concerns mounted over Iran’s nuclear program and the possibility of the country acquiring nuclear weapons. At the minimum, such a program would raise the risk of an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facility—a strike Washington might feel compelled to support. Were Iran actually to acquire nuclear weaponry, others in the region—notably Saudi Arabia—might seek to do the same, creating a potentially destabilizing nuclear arms race in the Persian Gulf. The nuclear question became central to U.S. policy toward Iran, and rightly so.

Expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East has also been worrying to policymakers in the region and in Washington. Ironically enough, Iran’s power received a huge boost with the U.S. overthrow of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein in 2003. His Sunni-dominated regime—though much weakened after its defeat in the Gulf War of 1991—had remained a counterweight to Iran. With that regime’s demise, Iran saw a major strategic adversary disappear. Since the U.S. invasion, Iraq’s now Shia-dominated government, though by no means an Iranian client, has come to enjoy a generally amicable relationship with Tehran over time.

Since 2011, revolutions across the region have created strategic challenges and opportunities for Iran. In Syria, a long-time ally, it intervened militarily to help save the regime of Bashar Assad. In Yemen, Iran has provided support to the Houthi rebels fighting the Saudi-backed government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. In Iraq, Iranian military influence has also increased due to the threat of ISIS; the Iraqi government has heavily depended upon the often Iranian-backed “Popular Mobilization Forces” to fight the group.¹

There is a sectarian component to these developments. In each instance, Iran intervened on behalf of Shia groups (the Houthi) or Shia-dominated governments (Syria and Iraq). But we should be very careful about viewing Iranian foreign policy—and response to it—in purely sectarian terms. On one level, Iran is acting as one



Since 2011, revolutions across the region have created strategic challenges and opportunities for Iran.

We should be wary of exaggerating the threat, substantial as it is, posed by expanding Iranian influence.

There were few tears shed by Middle East leaders when President Obama left office in January 2017.

would expect any regional power to do: courting former adversaries (Iraq), defending embattled partners (Syria), or causing mischief in an adversary's backyard (Yemen). Moreover, Iran has been prepared to support Sunni groups—notably Hamas—when it views such measures to be in its national interest. To reduce the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to an age-old sectarian conflict is to miss other factors that drive the current relationship between the two countries.

As our colleague Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar reminds us, domestic politics are also important drivers in both Tehran and Riyadh,² where elites use foreign policy to maintain or extend their power, deploying sectarian and nationalist rhetoric as they do so. Neither government is monolithic (nor, for that matter, is that of the United States). Nationwide protests in Iran in January 2018 included expressions of skepticism among the Iranian public toward the Islamic Republic's regional adventures, which have cost an extravagant sum as the country endures economic austerity. Whether this popular discontent will affect Iran's foreign policy is an open question.

We should be wary of exaggerating the threat, substantial as it is, posed by expanding Iranian influence. We are not talking about the Sassanid Empire reborn. In Syria, for instance, Iran may have successfully intervened on behalf of the Assad government, but it has done so at substantial cost. And the bloody conflict has left Iran arguably worse off strategically than it was before the outbreak of the civil war, when it could count on a strong Syrian state as a dependable partner.

Finally, we should be measured when we assess the military threat posed by Iran. Tehran has been successful in leveraging its military heft in places like Syria and Iraq through relatively modest direct deployments and support for far more numerous local militias and “foreign fighters.”^{3,4} But it remains outmatched, in conventional terms, by the United States and its Gulf Arab allies.⁵ Iran has a large standing army, but much of it is armed with obsolete equipment. Its military expenditures—both

in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP—are a fraction of those of Saudi Arabia, which purchased over \$100 billion worth of U.S. arms during Barack Obama's presidency and is massively superior to Iran in terms of state-of-the-art weaponry. Then, of course, there is the overwhelming military strength of the United States itself, which is sufficient to crush any direct, conventional Iranian attack on U.S. partners in the Persian Gulf.

THE OBAMA YEARS

Both Israel and Saudi Arabia perceived the Obama administration as feckless in handling growing Iranian influence in the Middle East. Much of this criticism—particularly among Gulf Arabs—focused on Obama's ambiguous, half-hearted approach to supporting the anti-Assad opposition and his related unwillingness to take decisive action against Russian and Iranian power in Syria, and some observers in the United States echoed these complaints. The same is true of the Obama administration's nuclear deal. Whatever its other merits, opponents were concerned that the agreement would free up resources for Tehran to pursue a more robust security policy in the region—both directly, by unfreezing Iranian assets held in the United States, and indirectly, by increasing Iranian exports after sanctions were lifted.

The nuclear deal—formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—was very narrowly focused on limiting Iran's ability to develop nuclear weaponry. While there was clearly some hope in the Obama administration that the agreement might lead to improved U.S.-Iranian relations, the administration viewed the agreement primarily as a pragmatic solution to a single—if important—threat to stability in the Persian Gulf. Still, there was widespread mistrust, notably in Israel and Saudi Arabia, of the Obama administration's policy toward Iran. There were few tears shed by Middle East leaders when President Obama left office in January 2017.

ENTER PRESIDENT TRUMP

While Donald Trump's administration has maintained Obama's policy toward ISIS, it has differed widely in its approach to Iran. This difference is starkest when it comes to the Iran nuclear agreement. The JCPOA was signed in April 2015 by Iran, the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany (the so-called "P5 + 1"). The agreement put substantial limits on Iran's nuclear program—particularly on the enrichment of uranium—for periods ranging from 10 to 15 years. In return, Iran received relief from U.S., EU and U.N. sanctions. The Obama administration expended a substantial diplomatic effort in negotiating the JCPOA; it also invested significant political capital in fighting back congressional efforts to kill the agreement.

The JCPOA is clearly one of the signature foreign policy achievements of the Obama administration. But it was—and remains—highly controversial. Congressional support for the deal largely fell along partisan lines, with Republicans opposing it. In the 2016 Republican primary, then-candidate Donald Trump was not the only contender who opposed the JCPOA; indeed, most of the major Republican candidates announced their opposition to the deal. Senator Ted Cruz, for instance, declared that he would rip up the agreement on his first day in office.⁶ The agreement was also controversial in Middle East, with Israel publicly opposing it and Saudi Arabia uneasy, at the very least, with what it viewed as a weakening U.S. commitment to the kingdom's security.

President Trump remains hostile to the JCPOA. He has twice "decertified" Iranian compliance under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015. But he has refrained from pulling the United States out of the JCPOA by reimposing sanctions (he can do so without congressional approval). President Trump has apparently been persuaded by senior figures in his administration (former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster) that simply walking away from the JCPOA would be counterproductive. Iran

would oppose any such effort, and all the other parties to the agreement are generally satisfied with it. Moreover, the unilateral reimposition of sanctions could create a rift with our allies in Europe. The administration may push for additional sanctions—by the U.S. and perhaps the EU—related to Iran's ballistic missile program and its support for groups like Hezbollah. The Europeans, however begrudgingly, appear prepared to at least discuss additional measures against Iran.⁷ China and Russia—the other P5 + 1 signatories of the agreement—are, however, less likely to accommodate U.S. desires. President Trump's nomination of CIA director Mike Pompeo to replace Rex Tillerson as secretary of state further clouds the JCPOA's future, as Pompeo is widely considered to be a hawk when it comes to Iran and has been a harsh critic of the nuclear deal.

The Trump administration's hostility to the JCPOA is merely part of a broader policy of confronting and rolling back Iran's influence throughout the region. Once in office, Trump moved quickly to consolidate the U.S. relationship with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two of Iran's most bitter enemies. He clearly sees Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as key partners in his strategy of confronting Iran. The Trump administration has announced major arms sales to both countries, given a major concession to the Israeli government by announcing the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the country's capital, and continued to support the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Early on in the dispute that broke out among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) last summer, President Trump appeared to be aligning the United States with Saudi Arabia (and its allies) against Qatar, but with time, the administration has taken a more even-handed approach. As we noted in our previous paper on the Syrian Civil War,⁸ U.S. policy in Syria appears to be driven in part by an attempt to constrain Iranian (and Russian) influence within that country. The Trump administration also supported Israel's February airstrikes against targets in Syria in the wake of an Iranian drone entering

Once in office, Trump moved quickly to consolidate the U.S. relationship with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two of Iran's most bitter enemies.

Israeli airspace. Despite its harsh line against Tehran, however, some critics have argued that the current administration hasn't gone *far enough*—as of yet—in countering Iran in the region.⁹

U.S. INTERESTS

It is not difficult conceptually to enumerate core U.S. interests vis-à-vis Iran. These include ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons, keeping the Strait of Hormuz open to the transport of hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf, and stopping Iran—or its proxies—from directly threatening our partners in the region. The difficulty comes in formulating policies that advance these goals at an acceptable cost. Keeping the Strait of Hormuz open is surely the least problematic; thanks to overwhelming military dominance, the U.S. has long been in a position to stop Iran from closing the strait for longer than an extremely short period. But the other goals raise complex issues. The JCPOA was—as most of its supporters admit—an imperfect agreement. But should we be prepared to scuttle it, even if it could lead to Iran resuming its nuclear program and an eventual U.S., Israeli, or combined military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities? Does our support for Saudi Arabian security include what may be a costly and counterproductive intervention in Yemen? Is there such a thing as too close a relationship with a strategic partner? Specifically, could it lead the United States to support policies inimical to U.S. interests? Managing alliances is always a delicate balancing act. The United States must of course take its partners' priorities into account, but this cannot rise to the level of complete deference when important U.S. interests are at stake. Yet any attempt to create strategic distance—as happened under President Obama—can lead to protests of abandonment and retreat.

Moreover, as we assess our interests in the region, we must recall that Tehran has its own. Iran may be, by any reasonable standard, a middling regional power compared to the United States. But the simple truth is that Iraq and Syria are far

more important to Iran than they are to the United States. Indeed, in the case of Iraq—a country that, under Saddam Hussein, launched a protracted and deadly war against Iran (with implicit U.S. support, it should be noted)—the stakes could not be higher from Tehran's point of view. Perhaps some future Iranian government—whether within the current institutional framework of an Islamic republic or as a successor to it—will begin to view its current assertive foreign policy as an ill-advised and costly exercise in overreach. But we should not count on it: whatever the government in Iran, it is hard to imagine it surrendering its decades-long relationship with Hezbollah or the Syrian regime (under Bashar Assad and, before him, his father Hafez).

LOOKING FORWARD

All signs point to rocky times ahead for U.S.–Iranian relations. Any U.S.–Iranian rapprochement—a faint prospect under the Obama administration—is even unlikelier under Trump. But rolling back Iranian influence will be difficult. As noted, we may see additional sanctions on non-nuclear aspects of Iranian behavior, though these would be unlikely to substantially alter Tehran's regional calculus; a unilateral U.S. decision to exit the agreement in toto might cause a crisis with our European allies. The United States can work at the margins to encourage the Iraqi government toward a more inclusive decision-making process that could accommodate Sunni grievances. And we can seek ways, again at the margins, to lessen the dependence of Iraq on Iran, perhaps through more generous provision of reconstruction assistance. But these are most unlikely to end Iranian influence in Baghdad. The best outcome in Yemen would be some power-sharing arrangement between the Houthis and the Saudi-backed government, but that might be a bitter pill for Saudi Arabia to swallow. Even were a deal in Yemen to be struck, Iranian influence with the Houthis would likely continue, though it would take a less deadly form.

In Syria, constraining Iranian influence will be difficult—and also risky. We could,

The simple truth is that Iraq and Syria are far more important to Iran than they are to the United States.

presumably, reverse Trump's decision to stop arming the anti-Assad opposition (with the exception of the Syrian Defense Forces in the north). The idea would be to raise the cost of supporting the Assad government for Iran. Maintaining a semi-permanent U.S. military force in northeastern Syria—apparently the current policy of the Trump administration—might provide leverage in peace talks that would include, as part of their outcome, the removal of Bashar Assad. But whether the simple removal of Assad would, by itself, significantly reduce Iranian influence—much less eradicate it—is a different question altogether. Everything would depend upon the nature of the regime that succeeds him. Iran (like Russia) might, conceivably, acquiesce to Assad's exit from office. But they would surely adamantly oppose any arrangement that would not protect their interests in Syria. Still, Assad's departure—even if Iran retains substantial influence in Syria—might provide a fig leaf for the United States and, particularly, the EU to move forward with reconstruction. Whether Gulf Arabs, an obvious source of funding for such rebuilding, would go along with such an approach is far from clear. Not least, unexpected events—Assad's overthrow in a coup, for instance—could create new opportunities to end the Syrian Civil War. But it is hard to imagine Iran surrendering its traditional influence in Syria without a fight. And it has the armed proxies on the ground to make the fight a nasty one.

CONCLUSION

The Trump administration will find rolling back Iranian influence a heavy lift and, at times, a dangerous one. The EU and others in the international community (notably Russia and China) will be wary of efforts to further isolate Iran. For their part, Israel and Saudi Arabia surely welcome the Trump administration's stance. But a perceived carte blanche from Washington might prompt leaders in Saudi Arabia and Israel to act in ways that do not conform to U.S. interests; the utterly avoidable crisis within the GCC is a case in point.

Mistrust between Washington and Tehran has shaped U.S.–Iranian relations for decades. That mistrust is surely at a higher level under Trump than under Obama. This raises the risk of miscalculation on both sides and the chances of escalation when and where an incident occurs, whether in Syria, the Strait of Hormuz, or between Israel and Hezbollah. It will require goodwill and deft diplomacy to avoid such conflict; both are in notoriously short supply in the Middle East.

ENDNOTES

1. Rhys Dubin, "Iraq's Militias Set Their Sights on Political Power," *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/30/iraqs-militias-are-setting-their-sights-on-power/>.
2. Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Iran–Saudi Relations: Factional Politics All The Way Down," in *Policy Roundtable 2–4: The Saudi–Iranian Cold War* (International Security Studies Forum, February 20, 2018), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/2-4-saudi-iranian>.
3. Ken Hubbard, Isabel Kershner, and Anne Barnard, "Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, 'Expands Axis of Resistance,'" *The New York Times*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html>.
4. Mujib Mashal and Fatima Faizi, "Iran Sent Them to Syria. Now Afghan Fighters Are a Worry at Home," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/world/asia/afghanistan-iran-syria-revolutionary-guards.html>.
5. Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis, "The Myth of the Iranian Military Giant," *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/10/the-myth-of-the-iranian-military-giant/>.
6. Julian Hattem, "Cruz: 'I will Rip to Shreds' the Iran Deal," *The Hill*, September 16, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/253962-cruz-promises-to-rip-to-shreds-iran-deal>.
7. Mark Landler, David E. Sanger, and Gardiner Harris, "Rewrite Iran Deal? Europeans Offer a Different Solution: A New Chapter," *The New York Times*,

February 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/us/politics/trump-europe-iran-deal.html>.

8. Robert Barron and Joe Barnes, "Trump Policy in the Middle East: Syria" (Issue brief no. 03.07.18, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas, March 7, 2018), <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/2883be8c/bi-brief-030718-cme-syria.pdf>.

9. Dennis Ross, "Trump Is All Talk On Iran," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/08/trump-is-all-talk-on-iran/>.

AUTHORS

Since coming to the Baker Institute in 1995, **Joe Barnes** has written extensively on foreign affairs and economic policy. In recent years he has focused on U.S. policy in the Middle East and the geopolitics of oil and gas. In addition to numerous institute studies, his work has appeared in newspapers, journals, and books. From 1979 to 1993, he was a career diplomat with the U.S. State Department, serving in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Robert Barron is the policy assistant to Ambassador Edward Djerejian, the director of the Baker Institute. Barron also helps to coordinate the activities of the institute's [Center for the Middle East](#). He previously lived and worked in Cairo as a journalist covering the energy industry and other business news for *Mada Masr*, an independent online newspaper. Barron graduated from Texas A&M's Bush School of Government with a master's degree in Middle East affairs and international development.

center for the
MIDDLE EAST

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

See more issue briefs at:
www.bakerinstitute.org/issue-briefs

This publication was written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute project. Wherever feasible, this research is reviewed by outside experts before it is released. However, the views expressed herein are those of the individual author(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

© 2018 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cite as:
Barnes, Joe and Robert Barron. 2018. *Trump Policy in the Middle East: Iran*. Issue brief no. 03.23.18. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.