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BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER
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US STRATEGY OPTIONS FOR IRAN'S REGIONAL CHALLENGE

By Kenneth M. Pollack
and Bilal Y. Saab



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Cover art: Two rifles are seen next to the US flag with a Persian script which reads, "Down with USA," at a war exhibition held by the Iranian army to mark the anniversary of army day at a military base in central Tehran April 14, 2009. *Photo credit: Morteza Nikoubazl/Reuters.*

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PUSHBACK
EXPOSING and COUNTERING IRAN

Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative in the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Among the set of foreign policy ideas and proposals that President Donald Trump shared with the American public and the world, both as a presidential candidate and later as an elected president, none is clearer than pushing back against Iran, a nation he believes to have “fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror” in the Middle East.¹

It has become increasingly apparent that Trump wants to scrap his predecessor's approach toward Iran, which he considers as “soft.” But for now, his frustration seems to have centered on the nuclear deal that the United States and other world powers signed with Iran in July 2015—a deal Trump claims Iran has violated.

There is loose talk in Washington that the Trump administration is considering “blowing up” the nuclear agreement. There are even rumblings of a US policy of regime change in Tehran. While it is premature to judge how Trump will decide to confront Iran—the administration is still formally reviewing its Iran policy—it is a safe bet that he will adopt a more aggressive approach than did President Barack Obama.

There are multiple strategic options that the United States could pursue to limit Iran's destabilizing and anti-American strategies in the Middle East with varying degrees of cost, risk, and probability of success attendant on each.² In this paper, we identify and analyze five such options: *Minimalist Containment*; *Enhanced Containment*; *Sandbagging*; *Pushback*; and *Regime Change* (some of these approaches could be employed in tandem).

The first option, *Minimalist Containment*, effectively represents the status quo, and has been the bare minimum of US policy toward Iran since the 1979 revolution. Its biggest flaw is that it is likely to aggravate the tension between the United States and several of its key regional partners, who view Iran as an existential threat. Worsening relations with the United States' core Middle East partners would, in turn, affect a variety of other US interests, such as counterterrorism cooperation, regional stability, and the potential for these partners to take matters into their own hands by becoming more aggressive toward Iran in ways that could exacerbate regional stability (e.g., the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen). It also would leave Tehran with tremendous room to maneuver and expand its influence across the region, as it has for the past decade.

The second option, *Enhanced Containment*, represents a slightly more assertive approach than the previous one and would start by increasing assistance to US regional partners not just by selling them more arms, but also by improving security relations and consultative mechanisms at tactical, operational, and, ideally, strategic levels. However, this approach may still fall short of what the United States' regional partners want, leaving them with little reason to restrain themselves for what they might view as insignificant enhancements. Further, it may not diminish Iran's presence in the region.

The third option, *Sandbagging*, is designed to modestly strengthen resistance to Iran in order to prevent it from securing outright victories and mire it in attrition battles across the region that could slowly undermine the Islamic regime's will, economic strength, and political control. Of course, doing so would mean committing additional resources to what is likely to be a protracted struggle, and the American public may tire of the fight before the Iranian leadership does.

1 Ben Hubbard and Thomas Erdbrink, “In Saudi Arabia, Trump Reaches out to Sunni Nations, at Iran's Expense,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-donald-trump.html?_r=0.

2 This paper derives inspiration from a shorter essay by the authors in *The Washington Quarterly* (September 2017), entitled “Countering Iran.”

The fourth option, *Pushback*, adopts a more assertive version of *Sandbagging*, one that would seek to measurably weaken Iran's regional influence and hopefully eliminate it from some states. It would mean bolstering US partners under pressure from Iran—like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—which could consequently enable reform efforts. It would likely entail taking a more active role in the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to ensure that Iran's allies do not prevail and, hopefully, engineer a stable end to the conflict that would allow each country to rebuild. While such an approach promises greater rewards, it comes with a higher price tag.

The fifth option, *Regime Change*, assumes that the Iranian leadership will never change its problematic behavior and odious policies in the Middle East simply because its identity and *raison d'être* as an ideological regime commit Iran to exporting its set of radical ideals and leave it unable to act like a non-revolutionary state. Therefore, *Regime Change* seeks to topple the theocracy in Iran; however, it runs the greatest risk of escalation and has the lowest likelihood of success (at least, ostensible success), although it could still help to achieve other, secondary goals.

Careful cost-benefit analysis of each option leads us to conclude that *Pushback* offers the most effective method of shifting Iran's behavior without going to war against the Islamic Republic. We believe this option has an affordable price and an acceptable level of risk, even as we acknowledge that both will be significantly greater than those the United States has undertaken against Iran so far.

Under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the United States employed *Minimalist Containment*, which resulted in the United States ignoring Iran's aggressive activities and efforts to expand its influence in the region. The result has been a dramatic worsening of regional security, as states fear Tehran's growing stature, its constant meddling, and its efforts to undermine their governments.

Diminishing Iran's influence across the region is necessary both to eliminate a key source of instability and anti-Americanism in a region that does not need any more of either and to reassure the United States' partners of

its commitment, so they do not take actions that would further exacerbate the situation. If successful, such a policy would create the political space needed to end the civil wars and allow regional governments to reform—both of which are necessary components of this policy in a quintessential chicken-or-egg cycle.

Iran has been active (but not uniquely so) in worsening regional chaos in the Middle East, but continued US inaction or the adoption of defense and deterrence postures toward Tehran are no longer perceived to be adequate. But neither does the Iranian threat justify another massive US effort to topple a large Middle Eastern regime—one that could require a US-led reconstruction to ensure that stability, not further chaos, is the result.

Finally, Washington should not be fooled into believing that a *Pushback* strategy would threaten the nuclear deal: The Iranians have demonstrated that they see such an agreement as unrelated to their regional activities and have pursued the latter very aggressively without fear that doing so would jeopardize the former. There is no reason that the United States could not do the same.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has reached historic levels of turmoil, and Iran is part of the problem. Iran is not the only source of the region's troubles, but neither is it a trifle. The failure of the Arab state system, the outbreak of multiple civil wars and their destabilizing spillover onto other states, the diminished political-military involvement of the United States in the region, and the unprecedented fissures that have emerged between the Sunni and Shia communities of the Middle East represent the principal underlying causes, and the Iranians can legitimately claim to feel threatened by some of them as well. Yet, Iran is hardly the victim in the Middle Eastern melodrama.

For decades, Iran has deliberately sought to maximize its sway across the region. It has insisted that the United States is its implacable foe—even when the United States was trying to ignore Tehran or to openly reconcile with it. In pursuit of both, Iran has persistently worked to weaken, subvert, or overthrow regional governments allied with the United States. It strives to stoke conflict and aid countless violent extremist groups fighting against US partners. To a considerable extent, Iran saw regional order as detrimental to its interests and fomented upheaval and strife without regard for the impact on the peoples of the Middle East. Iran may not have started all the fires in the region, but it has consistently taken up bellows to fan the flames.

When the Obama administration took office, one of the greatest security concerns across the region was Iran's efforts to acquire the capacity to build nuclear weapons. The United States led an international effort that brought unprecedented pressure on Tehran and forced it to negotiate the status of its nuclear program. Those negotiations resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which,

no matter how imperfect, has effectively taken the Iranian nuclear issue off the table for the next eight to thirteen years.

While valuable, the JCPOA removed only one of the problems posed by Iran. Few, if any, US regional partners believed that Iran would use nuclear weapons against them if it ever acquired them. For effectively all the states in the region, the principal threat of an Iranian nuclear arsenal was the extent to which it might embolden Tehran to act even more aggressively to undermine the regional status quo and overthrow regional governments that were not already allied to it. In short, Iran's regional behavior was always the critical threat, and the ferocious debate over the terms of the JCPOA itself distracted the US debate from that principal problem.

Since the signing of the JCPOA in July 2015, the issue has become ever clearer. Iran's nuclear program is no longer a problem, but Iran's foreign policy still is. To a certain extent, that problem has gotten worse because while negotiating the JCPOA, the Obama administration largely turned a blind eye to Iran's regional behavior—both out of fear that confronting Iran in the region would scuttle the nuclear negotiations and because President Obama wanted to disengage from the Middle East. Iran made significant inroads during that time: expanding its presence in Syria, taking on a much greater role in Iraq and Yemen, increasing its support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and other Kurdish groups, and more aggressively supporting Shia radicals in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia while continuing to equip Lebanon's Hezbollah with more lethal and sophisticated arms.

President Trump seized on this theme during his election campaign, decrying the Obama administration's non-confrontational—even welcoming—approach to Iran. Both then and



President Donald Trump and members of the US delegation participate in a bilateral meeting with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Saudi Arabian officials at the Royal Court Palace in Riyadh on May 20, 2017. *Photo credit: Shealah Craighead/The White House.*

since taking office, Trump has consistently stated that he wants to adopt a more confrontational policy toward Iran, one that would reverse the gains made by Tehran over the past ten years. In doing so, he has said everything that most Arab Gulf states would like to hear from the United States about Iran. During his recent visit to Saudi Arabia—his first foreign trip as president—Trump doubled down on the hawkish rhetoric against Iran in front of a gathering of leaders across the Arab-Muslim world and suggested isolating Iran, a nation that he noted had “fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.”³

Major stakeholders in the Gulf feel more reassured about Trump and his national security team and are already speaking of a new page in the relationship with the United States.

However, talk of a dramatic shift in US policy is premature, and it remains to be seen whether Trump will act differently from his predecessors: talking tough about Iran is easy; getting tough with Iran is much harder. Iran is a large, resourceful, and influential country, and while it is vastly inferior to the United States by every measure of power, it also has proven balefully difficult for the United States to contain. Moreover, the willingness of the American people—and the president—to commit meaningful resources to such a policy is very much in doubt. Confronting Iran without committing adequate resources is a fool's errand, and a dangerous one at that. Thus, deciding whether and how much to confront Iran depends to a considerable extent on an honest assessment of the costs, risks, and probability of success each would entail, as well as the ultimate end state that would result. That is the purpose of this paper.

³ Ben Hubbard and Thomas Erdbrink, “In Saudi Arabia, Trump Reaches out to Sunni Nations, at Iran's Expense,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-donald-trump.html?_r=0.



THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 4) transits at night in the Persian Gulf. Boxer is the flagship for the Boxer Amphibious Ready Group and, with the embarked 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, is deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, maritime security operations and theater cooperation efforts in the US 5th Fleet area of operations. *Photo credit: Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Douglas Bedford/US Navy.*

The United States shares many of the concerns of its Middle East partners about Iran's ambitions and policies in the region. But to ignore or belittle, the discrepancies between the two sides would be a grave mistake. There is no reason to celebrate these differences, as they are obvious fissures for Tehran to exploit. However, they need to be acknowledged and become the basis for a more candid exchange between Washington and its Arab partners regarding Iran. This is important because it is ultimately key to fashioning a realistic strategy that both the United States and its partners are committed to implementing.

Given the differing perspectives on the threat from Iran, all sides owe it to one another to acknowledge their priorities: where they are willing to commit resources and where they are not, so that everyone will understand what to expect. The United States' regional partners often complain—sometimes with justification—that what Washington says and what it does

with regard to Iran and the Middle East are seldom the same. If the United States and its partners are going to embark on a more confrontational approach toward Iran, even if it is only a relative shift from the previous decade, then these partners will seek, and the United States ought to be willing to offer them, an honest sense of what it will and will not do. If asked to pick between a fine sounding but unpredictable US policy or an unsatisfactory but clear one, Arab, Turkish, and Israeli officials would much prefer the latter, particularly in this era of tectonic shifts and increasing strategic uncertainty in the region and around the world.

THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

For the United States, Iran poses both extant and latent challenges to four key US interests in the Middle East: energy security; nuclear nonproliferation; counterterrorism; and the physical security of regional partners.



The sun rises over the Al Basra Oil Terminal in the North Persian Gulf. *Photo credit: Photographer's Mate 1st Class Curt Cooper/US Navy.*

1. Energy Security

Though the United States has decreased dramatically its dependence on Middle Eastern oil over the past decade, thanks in no small part to the US shale oil boom, it is not actually “independent” from it. As long as oil remains a critical input in the global economy with a price determined by the global market, the United States will remain vulnerable to international market fluctuations, which are—in turn—affected by Middle East stability. Whether it actually originates in the Middle East or any other part of the world, the oil supply is still connected to the region, because its price and availability are still linked to events in the Middle East. Consequently, import dependence and energy independence are two very different things.

Persian Gulf security matters a great deal to US and global energy security because of the region's richness and deep reserves of oil and gas. Tankers carrying between fifteen and twenty million barrels of oil a day pass through the Strait of Hormuz, accounting for about 20 percent of the world's oil consumption. Today, no actor threatens the stability of, or freedom of navigation in, that region more than Iran. Indeed, Iran is an important reason

why the United States has maintained a significant, forward-deployed military presence there since the early 1980s.

Nevertheless, at present and for the foreseeable future, US military capabilities both in the Gulf and globally vastly outmatch Iran's—a fact not lost on Tehran. It is highly unlikely that Iran would try to close the Strait of Hormuz or take some other direct military action to disrupt oil flows because doing so would invite a massive and swift US conventional response, likely with the blessing of the rest of the world.

Instead, the real threat that Iran poses to Middle Eastern energy exports is an indirect one. For a long time, the greatest disruptions to oil exports have been the result of internal instability: the Libyan Civil War has depressed Libyan oil exports by as much as 92 percent; the 1979 Iranian Revolution cut Iran's oil exports by 78 percent; and the Iraqi civil war of 2005–2008 diminished Iraqi oil exports by as much as 64 percent, despite the presence of 170,000 US and



Elite military special operations forces from the GCC and the US conducted a simulated rapid response to the hijacking of the motor tanker, or oil tanker, the *Hadiyah*, April 3, in Kuwait territorial waters. Special forces teams from the GCC, and US Naval Special Warfare and rigid-hull inflatable boat teams simulated an air and sea-borne rapid insertion, search and seizure of the occupied tanker and its hijackers, and the safe release of the tanker crewmen. *Photo credit: Master Sgt. Timothy Lawn/US Central Command.*

Allied soldiers trying to stabilize the country.⁴ Thus, it is Iran's efforts to subvert regional regimes, feed insurgencies, and stoke civil wars that create the most tangible threat to Middle Eastern oil exports.

2. Nuclear Nonproliferation

The United States surely does not want to see more Middle Eastern states acquire nuclear weapons. In part, this stems from the region's energy exports: few things could be more detrimental to stable oil prices than a nuclear exchange (or the constant threat of one) in the Middle East. Add to this the danger that fragile Middle Eastern states might lose control of their

nuclear arsenal to the many violent extremist groups with noxious ideologies that populate the region. Even the more stable Middle Eastern states often harbor deep grudges against one another that could erode restraint in a crisis. Consequently, there would be real fears of rapid and/or inadvertent escalation in the event of interstate tension.

The JCPOA has mollified fears of a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (had the Iranians gotten the bomb, Saudi Arabia might well have tried to get one, too, and so might others). But this is only a temporary solution (assuming the Iranian regime honors the current deal) because the strictest terms expire in 2025 and 2030, after which Iran will be able to revive its enrichment program. Absent a dramatic breakthrough in US-Iran relations (which seems unlikely), the United States and its allies will have until 2025 to find another, hopefully permanent, solution to the problem of Iranian nuclear proliferation.

⁴ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, Revised Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 230; CIA, *World Factbook* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1989); Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 224; Oil production statistics for Libya and Iraq are from the US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/>, accessed December 2, 2014.

3. Counterterrorism

Iran has not been involved in a terrorist attack on the United States for at least six years (prior to 2011, Iranian-backed Iraqi terrorist groups routinely attacked US personnel and facilities in Iraq). Nevertheless, Tehran remains an active sponsor of various terrorist groups—including Hezbollah, the PKK, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Through those groups and others, Iran continues to back terrorist operations against US partners. Moreover, there is a very tangible latent threat that Iran might begin targeting the US military presence in the region again at any time. For instance, once the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has been driven out of Iraq, it is unclear how Tehran would react to a continued US military presence there. Most Americans and Iraqis view such a residual presence as desirable, but Iran may not and might therefore order its Iraqi allies and/or proxies to once again target Americans in the hopes of driving the United States from Iraq all over again.

4. Security of Regional Partners

Iran seeks to weaken, dominate, and overturn the government of virtually every US partner in the Middle East. Iran does not always act on that desire, but it rarely lets an opportunity to do so pass. Tehran supports violent actors in Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, the Palestinian Authority, and Lebanon. In those regional states where Tehran does not support opposition groups, it is generally because there are no groups willing to accept Iranian aid.

Strong and stable Arab partners help the United States pursue stability and prosperity in the Middle East, work toward a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, fight terrorism in and from the region, and prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The opposite is equally true: vulnerable and unstable partners make it much harder for the United States to meet any of these shared goals. In short, Washington generally benefits from strengthening its partners because, more often than not, they are critical to achieving America's goals. Therefore, if Iran seeks to weaken US partners, it impacts Washington because it raises the costs of pursuing its main priorities in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, the United States' partners have often exaggerated the extent of the Iranian threat they face. At times, this has been to shift blame from their real domestic problems to an external Iranian bogeyman. In other cases, they truly do believe that Iran is responsible for virtually any problem that arises. This divergence in estimates of the extent of the Iranian threat is an important one between Washington and its Middle Eastern partners and deserves to be discussed openly so that neither side has a false set of expectations.

THE VIEW FROM THE REGION

Different states in the region see the Iranian threat differently, just as they prioritize and pursue their interests differently. For example, the Omanis tend not to be overly alarmed by Iran. In contrast, the Saudis, Emiratis, and Bahrainis believe they face an Iranian threat that is nothing less than existential. Between these two extremes lies a group of countries including Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, and Kuwait that have concerns about Iran but less acute threat perceptions. They also are more pragmatic in their approach toward the Islamic Republic for reasons having to do with geography, history, commerce, domestic politics, and leadership style.

Though it is Riyadh that is most critical of and worried about the Iranian leadership's policies in the region, it is Manama that can legitimately say that Tehran poses an existential threat to its government, because Iran tried to overthrow the Bahraini monarchy in the early 1980s through militant proxies. Today, the Bahrainis are convinced that Iran is once again aiding various internal Shia opposition groups seeking everything from reform to the overthrow of the monarchy. Iran indirectly stirs the sectarian pot in Saudi Arabia's primarily Shia Eastern Province every now and then, but as far as is currently known, it has not sought to topple the Saudi monarchy or seriously interfere in its domestic politics since the 1980s. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a (legal) case against Iran, too. Other than its concerns about Tehran's radical ideology and destabilizing behavior, the UAE has a territorial dispute with Iran, which has, since 1971, occupied three islands (Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb) that Emirati



Demonstrators at the Pearl Roundabout in the financial district of Manama during the Arab Spring protests of 2011.
Photo credit: Bahrain in Pictures/Wikimedia.

Nevertheless, there is a regional consensus that Iran is a threat, even if the sense of magnitude differs from country to country. Indeed, it is generally seen as a bigger threat by those in the Middle East than by the United States and others outside the region.

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What is of far greater importance, however, is the lack of consensus among regional states over what to do about Iran.

Finally, there is one additional difference between the United States and its regional partners that needs to be addressed: the differing perspectives over internal versus external threats. The United States has demonstrated repeatedly that it will go to war to defend its regional partners from direct, overt military attack: the 1987-88 Tanker War, the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, the containment of Iraq from 1991 to 2003, and the invasion of Iraq itself were all motivated by a desire to protect US regional partners from attack by Iraq or Iran. There is little doubt that the United States will act to defeat any threat to the external security of its regional partners, including from Iran.

Unfortunately, those same partners are increasingly concerned that the primary threat they face is internal. And US interventions in interstate conflicts do not necessarily translate into a willingness to defend a regional government from an internal effort to unseat it. Indeed, many of America's Arab friends were horrified when the United States made no effort to help the Hosni Mubarak regime fend off the Egyptian revolution of 2011. This fear that the United States will not help them against internal threats meshes painfully with their perception of the threat from Iran, which they primarily see as an internal one: Iran aiding terrorists, revolutionaries, and insurgents from among their own people. Their judgement that the United States would be unlikely to aid them against such a threat in a moment of crisis, even if it were aided or inspired by Iran, underscores this major divergence in perceptions of the nature and extent of the Iranian threat.

REFORM IS PARAMOUNT

The divergence between the United States and its Arab partners over the threat from Iran to their internal stability is a critical one. Historically, Iran has had little success creating rifts in other countries but has had great success in aggravating festering domestic rifts. Thus, the best and perhaps only way to limit Iran's ability to exacerbate the internal problems of other Middle Eastern states is to help those states address their internal issues, something that can only be done through comprehensive reform programs.⁵

Therefore, the options below would benefit greatly from substantial reform efforts in virtually all of America's regional partners. The real question is the extent to which the United States is willing to help foster those efforts. Although this paper is not the place to discuss such a program in detail, it is worth noting that such assistance could take many different forms.

While all the different policy options would benefit from meaningful reform among the United States' Middle Eastern partners, some of the options would entail the commitment of greater energy and resources to help make that a reality.

5 For a more comprehensive explanation of the linkage between security threats in the Middle East and the importance of reform among America's partners in the Middle East, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "Security and Public Order," a Working Group Report of the Middle East Strategy Task Force, The Atlantic Council and the Brookings Institution, February 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Security_and_Public_Order_web_0316-Updated.pdf; and Bilal Y. Saab, "The New Containment: Changing America's Approach to Middle East Security," Atlantic Council, July 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_New_Containment.pdf. For a fuller description of how the United States and other extra-regional states could encourage reform in the Middle East, see Tamara Wittes, "Politics, Governance, and State Society Relations," a Working Group Report of the Middle East Strategy Task Force, The Atlantic Council and the Brookings Institution, November 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Politics_Governance_and_State-Society_Relations_web_1121.pdf.



US STRATEGY OPTIONS

The United States' overall or ultimate objective regarding Iran is to cause a noticeable and durable change in Iranian behavior while avoiding a large-scale military conflict. It is a difficult balance to achieve because of the challenges Washington faces in managing escalation. The United States has an overwhelming advantage at the higher end of the escalation spectrum because of its total conventional and nuclear superiority over Iran. However, because the United States prefers to avoid war, which is almost always unpredictable once it starts, Washington typically is more tolerant of aggressive Iranian behavior at the lower end of the escalation spectrum, which is precisely where Iran has a considerable advantage, given its experience and freedom of action in contrast to Washington's legal and political constraints and relative inexperience.

The strategic options below would affect this delicate balancing act differently. They are presented here with a brief analysis of their basic requirements, pros, and cons.

Service members perform a drill for Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Command Sgt. Maj. John W. Troxell, Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at Al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar, Dec. 6, 2016. *Photo credit:* Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Dominique A. Pineiro/US Department of Defense.

1 MINIMALIST CONTAINMENT

This option effectively represents the status quo—the bare minimum—of US policy toward Iran since the 1979 revolution. It represents the Obama administration's approach to Iran, particularly since the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. It is no surprise that *Minimalist Containment* is the least preferred course of action for Washington's regional partners because they believe that it has completely failed to convince Iran to desist from its aggressive and interventionist behavior across the Middle East.

In broad terms, *Minimalist Containment* would mean maintaining the current US military presence in the region to deter overt Iranian aggression; limiting sanctions against Iran to minimum levels to avoid a fight over the JCPOA;

providing only that military support necessary to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq and to placate Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Yemen. It would mean hewing to a rather passive posture in the face of most Iranian provocations in the region, including the unprofessional and dangerous antics of Iran's naval forces in the Persian Gulf.

A posture of *Minimalist Containment* would also necessarily entail encouraging the United States' regional partners to do more to handle their own problems with Iran and be willing to tolerate the consequences of their actions. President Obama's famous advice to Arab Gulf partners that the most effective and long-lasting solution to Iranian destabilization is serious domestic reform would still inform US policy. In short, *Minimalist Containment* essentially puts most of the burden, or responsibility, on the countries in the region that feel most threatened by Iran in order to force Tehran to stop meddling in their internal affairs.

Pros:

- This option would be consistent with the United States' strategic objective of reducing its military involvement in the Middle East, minimizing its commitment of resources to Middle East policy, and freeing up resources to deal with other regions, if Washington deemed them more threatened;
- It would be consistent with US efforts to further encourage regional partners to step up and assume greater security responsibilities and stabilization roles in the region;
- It would clarify to regional partners the parameters of further US military and security involvement against Iran. This clarification should help reduce uncertainty about US policy, and thus regional partners' own planning and expectations from Washington;
- By staying away from sectarian conflict, the United States would drastically reduce the risk of getting entangled in another civil war in the Middle East.

Cons:

- Iran's regional challenge is on the rise, and Tehran is becoming bolder in its efforts to spread and deepen its influence in the Middle East. US inaction is likely to make that problem worse. The more adept Iran is at pressing ahead with unconventional military and subversion strategies, the more harmful Washington's passive conventional military posture becomes;
- If Washington essentially stays out of the business of countering Iran, opting instead to watch its regional partners try to do it themselves, there is a high risk that the partners' actions would prove ineffective or contribute further to regional instability. Unfortunately, this has been the historical pattern over the past five to ten years. Increased instability, in turn, could lead to escalation and drag the United States into war against Iran and possibly Russia. The misbegotten Saudi intervention in Yemen was a product of the Obama administration's adherence to *Minimalist Containment*;
- This would not help ease political tensions between the United States and its key regional partners. If the United States continues to remain passive in the face of growing Iranian activity, it will decrease the likelihood that US regional partners would then be more active against al-Qaeda and ISIS, and would reinforce their desire to hedge their bets and work more closely with Russia and China.

2 ENHANCED CONTAINMENT

As its name suggests, this option represents a slightly more assertive approach than *Minimalist Containment*, but it still focuses on, or is limited to, stopping Iran from attacking US partners conventionally. And it would put the onus on US partners to try to contain or reduce Iran's regional influence. What is different from the previous option, however, is that the United States would make a more serious effort to assist its partners in performing this task, not just by selling them more arms but also by meaningfully enhancing security relations and consultative mechanisms at tactical, operational, and, ideally, strategic levels.

US Strategy Options for Iran's Regional Challenge

This would include US engagement in the following activities:

- Holding periodic military (air, ground, and naval) exercises with regional partners that directly address and train for Iran's hybrid warfare;
- Sharing intelligence on Iran more swiftly and effectively;
- Improving cooperation on cybersecurity and assisting regional partners in their goal of building greater local competencies and capacities in the cyber domain;
- Advising them on how to develop more effective concepts of operations (CONOPS);
- Sharing with them best practices on civil-military relations and defense planning and organization;
- Offering training and seminars for their military leadership to help build a larger community of strategic thinkers with expertise in special operations and counterinsurgency, and to foster a culture of "red-teaming" (or thinking through a problem from the adversary's perspective) and of accountability.
- Many of these activities have already been discussed and agreed upon during the previous Camp David and Riyadh US-GCC summits, but implementation has either been lacking or nonexistent, primarily because the political relationships under Obama were so tense.

Pros:

- This option might signal a new chapter in the political and thus security relationship and could help develop a stronger appetite on the part of some regional partners to do some things Washington has asked of them, but which they have always resisted, including greater domestic reforms; better counterterrorism cooperation; assistance with Syrian refugee settlement; and a more active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;

- This approach should maintain the low-risk profile that serves to keep the United States from getting sucked into sectarian conflicts and regional power struggles in the Middle East, and would allow Washington to help its partners address their own security concerns and become more reliable and responsible regional players;
- It would somewhat boost the credibility and reputation of the United States among other world partners as a serious ally that is sensitive to its friends' security concerns, even if Washington does not fully see eye to eye with them;
- If the strategy were to succeed, it could force the Iranians to dial down their destabilization campaign because of the increasing costs of pursuing it.

Cons:

- US regional partners already see *Minimalist Containment* as nothing, and they might see *Enhanced Containment* as "nothing plus." The greatest threat is that, in these situations, they would (again) likely feel the need to address the perceived threats from Iran themselves, which they have traditionally done in an overly aggressive manner and then found out that they lacked the capability to actually realize their goals, with potentially dire consequences for themselves and thus for the United States;
- Such limited US assistance might fail to provide regional partners with enough of an edge, given their steep learning curve and the sizeable advantage the Iranians enjoy in unconventional warfare. It could even backfire and encourage Iran to escalate and engage in even more disruptive activities, taking advantage either to preserve their edge and regional position or being emboldened by the travails of their adversaries;
- No matter how much Washington insists that it is only playing a supporting role, Tehran and perhaps Moscow may still believe that the United States is the prime mover, and so they and their allies might target US interests in the region more directly and aggressively;

- A full-fledged program that involves various agencies in the US government and is designed to overhaul security relations with regional partners requires a healthy amount of political leadership, bandwidth, and resources. Because those are always finite, they would have to come at the expense of other, perhaps more urgent or important pursuits. In short, there is an opportunity cost;
- It might solidify the (incorrect) perception among US regional partners that if only the United States would do more, the Iranian threat could be neutralized. This approach, therefore, might shift the narrative of responsibility back onto Washington's shoulders.
- Over the long term, it could work. Low oil prices have stretched Iran's budget and protracted attrition campaigns can eventually produce real results, like US assistance to the Afghan Mujahadeen against the Soviets in the 1980s;
- It would require an increase in the US commitment to counter Iran, more than was made available from the Obama administration—or President George W. Bush, for that matter. This would be an important point to America's regional partners, and might be enough to convince them not to act rashly themselves but instead to follow Washington's lead;
- The United States is far wealthier than Iran, and so it should be more capable of fighting a war of attrition than is Iran; however, before taking it on, the United States must first address the cost it is willing to pay and for how long.

3 SANDBAGGING

This option is designed to enhance resistance to Iran (albeit modestly) by preventing it from securing outright victories and miring it in attrition battles across the region that could slowly undermine the Islamic Republic's will, economic strength, and political control. It could mean increasing US support to the Syrian opposition and the governments in Iraq, Yemen, Turkey, and even Bahrain. It might entail constant, low-level cyber warfare with Iran and would certainly seek to impose additional sanctions against Iran to try to limit its revenues. Indeed, the principal goal of this strategy would be to bleed the Iranians in every possible way in the expectation that eventually, like the Soviet Union, they would have to rein in and even abandon their foreign commitments, as they simply lack the resources to maintain them. Moreover, this strategy would be best served by an aggressive, creative campaign to find new ways to impose additional political, economic, and military costs on Tehran.

Pros:

- Although more resource-intensive than either *Minimalist Containment* or *Enhanced Containment*, *Sandbagging* would be considerably cheaper than either *Pushback* or *Regime Change*;

Cons:

- *Sandbagging* would mean committing additional resources to what is likely to be a protracted struggle, and the US public may tire before the Iranian leadership does;
- Ideology and zeal might compensate for resources and allow Iran to persevere much longer than the United States would expect. In the worst case, it might mean that the United States is committing far more resources of its own than it is forcing Iran to consume, making it more cost-effective for Tehran than Washington;
- Because *Sandbagging* is a confrontational strategy, Iran will most probably respond asymmetrically, striking US interests at times and in places of its own choosing, where the United States is vulnerable and Iran is strong. That raises the possibility of escalation to a more dangerous crisis and might require a patience and forbearance that the US political system tends to lack;

If the United States adopts a *Pushback* strategy, it would mean deliberately challenging Iran more forcefully in areas where Tehran is trying to spread or deepen its influence and where US interests are at risk.

Iranian ship intercepts USS Thunderbolt (PC-12) on July 25, 2017. Photo credit: US Navy.

- *Sandbagging* could put the United States on the proverbial slippery slope. It is not meant to work quickly, and both internal critics and regional partners might demand a greater commitment of resources to make it work faster, which may serve to get the United States more deeply mired in the fight. After all, if the United States is willing to commit more resources than *Sandbagging* would suggest is prudent, then the United States should approach the problem in a different fashion—more like the next option.

4 PUSHBACK

This option adopts a more assertive version of *Sandbagging*; one that would seek to dramatically weaken Iran's regional influence and hopefully eliminate it from some states. If the United States adopts a *Pushback* strategy, it would mean deliberately challenging Iran more forcefully in areas where Tehran is trying to spread or deepen its influence and where US interests are at risk.⁶

⁶ Some of the Trump administration's actions in the region—increased involvement in Yemen, where US assistance to Saudi Arabia and the UAE is geared toward not just combating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula but also limiting the gains of the Iranian-backed Houthi and Ali Abdullah Saleh alliance; and in Syria, with the recent US strikes against an airfield, which Syrian jets used in a chemical weapons attack on Syrian civilians—might reflect the beginnings of a strategy of pushback.

Pushback envisions more direct involvement by the United States against Iran. To be clear, it would not mean that the United States would go it alone or escalate to a ground war in the Middle East by sending thousands of US soldiers to do battle with the regionally deployed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces and Shia militias. It should, however, go hand in hand with more serious investments in capabilities that allow the US military to operate in grey zones to fight back against Iran's preferred mode of warfare, either directly or through proxies and allies of our own. Moreover, the United States might loosen its rules of engagement in the Persian Gulf, encouraging American naval vessels not to back down from Iranian provocations, enforcing the law of the sea and freedom of navigation more robustly, and standing their ground when Iranian naval vessels harass them and otherwise act in an unprofessional and dangerous fashion.

Pushback could mean taking more aggressive steps to undermine Iranian allies across the region such as the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Hamas. It would likely mean finding creative new ways either to sanction Iran or impose additional financial costs on it, if new sanctions threatened the JCPOA. In particular, Iran's endless, indefensible human rights violations furnish both a moral imperative and excellent method of exerting additional financial and political pressure on Tehran. The Iranian regime is highly sensitive to internal protest, believing (rightly) that a great many of its own people



would like to see it gone. It cracks down hard and arbitrarily, and in ways that most Western populations find appalling, like the imprisonment and torture of various Iranian-Americans on absurd charges. Making a greater effort to mobilize international support to hold Iran accountable for these abuses, and force them to pay a price if they will not, would put Tehran on the defensive, force it to expend resources at home rather than abroad, and potentially deny it access to overseas markets.

Pushback would certainly mean bolstering US partners under pressure from Iran, like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—although such assistance should focus on enabling reform more than anything else. It likely would mean taking a more active role in the civil wars in Iraq and Syria to ensure that Iran's allies do not prevail by engineering a stable end to those conflicts and allowing them to rebuild in peace. Yemen is a more difficult task as Iran stands to gain less there, US interests are less directly threatened, and it is not even clear that it actually is threatening the Saudis; so, even under a *Pushback* approach, it would be better to minimize the American commitment to Yemen. Nevertheless, a key difference between this approach and *Sandbagging* is that *Pushback* would entail a much greater US effort to bring at least some of the regional civil wars to quicker ends in order to eliminate the opportunities these create for Iran to expand its influence and mischief.

Pros:

- This approach offers the greatest prospect of significantly limiting Tehran's power in the region in the (relatively) near term;
- It would send a clear and strong signal to Tehran that its bellicosity will no longer go unchecked. By significantly increasing the costs of Iran's pursuit of its problematic regional agenda, Tehran might be forced to scale back its hegemonic ambitions and opportunistic approach;
- It would solidify the United States' relations with regional partners most concerned about Iran and encourage them to offer not only greatly increased cooperation on a range of issues but also more substantial pay offs from those commitments. It also offers them the biggest and most tangible *quid pro quo* for engaging in real, sustained reform;
- It might communicate to Moscow, and possibly other adversaries, that the United States is serious about countering hybrid or asymmetric warfare across the globe where US interests lie;
- It would much improve the readiness of the US military with respect to today's and tomorrow's military challenges, which most likely will include a heavy dose of sophisticated hybrid warfare. This option would give strategic planners and defense policy officials at the Pentagon the opportunity to adjust various US military postures around the world and make them more dynamic, flexible, and capable of addressing effectively the challenges of hybrid warfare.

Cons:

- Although the costs of *Pushback* do not need to be as ruinously expensive as the Iraq and Afghan wars (because this strategic option would not employ large numbers of US troops), it would not be cheap either. It would entail tens of billions of dollars over the next four to eight years for asymmetric warfare, covert action, tighter sanctions, expanded military assistance to regional partners, stabilization, and peacekeeping operations;

US Strategy Options for Iran's Regional Challenge

- Part of the costs stem from the fact that Iran has mastered the art of operating unconventionally in the region. Therefore, Tehran has a sizeable advantage over the United States and its regional partners, who have pursued this to a much more limited extent;
- The policy entails certain risks. In particular, such a muscular policy might provoke Tehran to challenge aspects of it—especially in the early phase of its implementation. This could escalate tensions rather quickly and encourage Iran to dial up its destabilization campaign and even hurt the United States in places where it has vital interests, such as in Iraq and the Gulf. Such an escalation could engage the Russians and theoretically even lead to a general war;
- Depending on the resources the United States deploys to pursue this option, it would have to be effectively coordinated at an inter-agency level. The worst thing Washington could do would be to start building up new indigenous forces in the region or even just deploying more military capabilities without having a complementary diplomatic strategy. Historically, this has been hard for the United States (but not impossible);
- The American public may have strong reservations about the United States expanding or deepening its military involvement in the Middle East—US elites certainly do—although public opinion polls have shown important differences between the elites and the majority of citizens. This would not be a deal breaker, but certainly a challenge that could spur deeper political infighting and possibly a political crisis.

5 REGIME CHANGE

This is a high-risk, high-reward option for the United States, but it cannot be dismissed because the idea is favored by some on the far right in Washington. The rationale behind this option is that the Iranian leadership will never change its problematic behavior in the Middle East simply because “it is who they are”—an ideological regime seriously committed to exporting its set of radical ideals and unable to

act like a non-revolutionary state. According to this perspective, Tehran behaves like a shark that must keep moving to survive and cannot stop pursuing an expansionist agenda in the region. There is certainly considerable evidence to support this perspective.

With these factors in mind, and agreeing that neither containment nor deterrence have worked with the Islamic Republic for nearly four decades, Washington could conclude that the surest and most effective way to put an end to Iran's dangerous regional policy would be to overthrow the Islamist regime and help build a new leadership by providing various forms of support to pro-democracy forces inside Iran, cultivating unhappy minorities, and engaging in sabotage/cyberwar operations against critical government installations and infrastructure, or all of the above. Even if it chooses not to pursue *Regime Change* fully, the Trump administration might pick up pieces of this option as adjuncts to one of the previously mentioned options.

Pros:

- It would eliminate, once and for all, the largest state sponsor of terrorism around the world and one of the most powerful sources of regional instability;
- New leadership in Tehran could unleash the human and democratic potential of the Iranian people, thereby contributing to a more stable Middle East;
- The departure of a radical Iranian leadership could significantly reduce or extinguish the fires of sectarianism across the Middle East, which could affect progress on the campaign against Islamist extremism and radicalization in the region;
- A new Iranian government and political elite would possibly break the axis between Tehran and Moscow and terminate the Iran-Syria and Iran-Hezbollah alliances;
- Working with, or at least supporting, the domestic opposition to overthrow the regime could cause change at a much lower cost than a possible war or military invasion.

Cons:

- This option is the one most likely to trigger a wider war between Iran and the United States, the consequences of which could be detrimental—even devastating—for Middle East stability and, potentially, for generations of Iranians;
- There is no guarantee that ousting the regime would usher in a government that aligns with US interests, especially as most Iranians do not support US policies in the region and resent American interference stemming from memories of 1953, when the CIA helped overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq;
- The Iranian government is well protected; it is extremely wary of internal revolt and has successfully defeated or repressed anything that has resembled a potential source of resistance to date. Thus, it is extremely difficult for opposition movements to survive, let alone to gather enough momentum to incite meaningful change;
- A lack of reliable intelligence can cause efforts at regime change to backfire; without sound information, the United States may back the wrong groups;
- Many Iranians are wary of US support since, if found out by the regime, it could be an excuse for increased repression and lead to an even more brutal crackdown on opposition figures.

HOW SANCTIONS FIT

Even though sanctions should not be construed as a strategy, the US government, and especially the US Congress, see a great deal of merit in sanctions as a tool. This explains why US officials frequently rely on sanctions to address various foreign policy issues, including trying to change the problematic behavior of adversaries and rogue or terrorist entities. There is a sentiment among many US lawmakers and decision makers that if only the sanctions tool could be enhanced or perfected, Washington could force its adversaries to quit their bad behavior and act more responsibly. That may be true in some cases where the adversary's economic and military capabilities are vulnerable, but in cases

where the adversary is skilled and experienced in the art of survival, endowed with tangible and intangible resources, and enjoys some leverage, like Iran, the likelihood of sanctions, on their own, succeeding in achieving their desired impact is low. This is not to say that sanctions are unimportant or even overblown. Quite the contrary. It is impossible to imagine that the United States could have gotten to “yes” with Iran on the nuclear deal without the pressure of the unprecedented sanctions imposed by Washington and an impressive coalition of states determined to see Iran curb its nuclear activities. Yet, sanctions can only ever be one part of a strategy designed to limit or reduce Iran's disruptive role in the Middle East.

One key question regarding the potential impact of sanctions is how much the Iranian regime values its regional foreign policy. There is no question that they value it greatly. But they also valued their nuclear program greatly, and yet, the sanctions imposed from 2009 to 2012 were enough to force Tehran to make major concessions on its nuclear program—concessions it never wanted to make—even if they were not as deep as those the United States and its regional partners wanted.

Would it be possible to convince Iran to make equally important and painful concessions on its regional policy if the United States were to apply more sanctions? That is still an open question, but it seems unlikely to produce as positive a result as for the nuclear program. The available evidence indicates that the Iranian leadership sees its regional policy as part and parcel of its legitimacy, its mission, and its survival. Many in the leadership appear to feel a moral and religious responsibility—as well as a security need—to export their revolution and theocratic system of government. Sanctions alone, no matter how painful, are not likely to change their calculus given how deeply ingrained it seems to be in the minds of the ayatollahs.

None of this suggests that sanctions should have a limited role in any of the five broader options listed above. Sanctions can play an important role in most—even all—of them. However, clarifying when this tool might be beneficial and when it might be counterproductive is key. Indeed, not all sanctions are constructed similarly and not all advance the same goals.



THE CASE FOR PUSHBACK

Qassem Soleimani, leader of the IRGC Quds Force, sits beside Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during a religious ceremony at a mosque in Tehran in March 2015. Photo credit: Khamenei.ir/Wikimedia.

Careful cost-benefit analysis of each option leads us to conclude that *Pushback* offers the most effective method of shifting Iran's behavior, at an affordable price, without going to war against the Islamic Republic.

We believe that both *Minimalist Containment* and *Enhanced Containment* are too little at this time, given the turmoil in the Middle East and the considerable gains that Iran has already made. Under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the United States tried to ignore Iran's aggressive activities in the region. The result has been a dramatic worsening of regional security as states fear Tehran's growing stature, its constant meddling, and its efforts to undermine their governments. Iran has not been the cause of all the Middle East's problems, but it has been a major accelerant of the regional conflagration. In the absence of greater US action against Iran, regional partners have engaged in increasingly aggressive and reckless behavior to try to check Iranian influence on their own, and that too has contributed to the current state of

turmoil. Further inaction or even just playing the defense-and-deterrence game is no longer adequate. Yet, neither does the Iranian threat justify another massive US effort to topple a regime—an effort that could require a US-led reconstruction to ensure that stability, not further chaos, is the result.

Diminishing Iranian influence across the region is necessary both to eliminate a key source of instability and anti-Americanism in a region that does not need any more of either, and to reassure the United States' partners of its commitment, so that they will not take actions that will further exacerbate the situation. If successful, such a policy would create the political space needed to end the civil wars and allow regional governments to reform—both of which are necessary components of this policy in a quintessential chicken-or-egg cycle.

Of the next two more robust options—*Sandbagging* and *Pushback*—we prefer the latter, because it does not seem that engaging

Iran in a protracted battle of attrition across the region makes much sense. First, *Sandbagging* plays to Iran's relative superiority in low-intensity conflict and could be compensated for by Iranian zeal to diminish its costs. In addition, Iran has a major geographical advantage: it is physically and permanently in the Middle East in ways the United States clearly is not. Second, *Sandbagging* may take too long to show results, too long to affect the strategic calculus of the United States' regional partners, and too long for the American people. (Not to mention too long for the hundreds of thousands of innocent people who will die, and the millions driven from their homes, if the United States chooses to feed the flames of the region's wars rather than trying to end them.)

It is our conclusion that *Pushback* can work and that it can do so at an acceptable level of cost and risk, even as we acknowledge that both will be significantly greater than those the United States currently has undertaken. But given the failure of Washington's current approach, it seems equally clear the United States will have to pay more and risk more if it is going to secure its policy objectives toward Iran.

Lastly, *Pushback* does not necessarily threaten the nuclear deal: Iran has demonstrated that it sees the JCPOA as unrelated to its regional activities and has pursued the latter very aggressively without fear that doing so would jeopardize the former. There is no reason that the United States should not do the same.

Pushback is likely to work best if it is married to elements of *Enhanced Containment* including the overhauling of security relations with regional partners. The United States may also have to adopt aspects of *Sandbagging* in places of lesser importance, where it is not ready to pay the costs and run the risks of more decisive action. While it will take some time to reap the full benefits of *Pushback*, it has a higher chance of succeeding if the United States commits, unlike in previous years, to becoming a more active player and real partner. Domestic reforms remain crucial to the success of the joint enterprise of countering Iran, but the United States also has much to say in moving this long-overdue process in the right direction.

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