BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Strategic Options

Report of the Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East

MAY 2018

TASK FORCE CO-CHAIRS

Ambassador Eric Edelman
Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey
Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Jake Sullivan
Former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. State Department
Former National Security Advisor to the Vice President

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Ambassador Morton Abramowitz
Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey

Henri Barkey
Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center

Hal Brands
Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies

Svante Cornell
Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program

Ambassador Ryan Crocker
Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon

Ambassador Robert Ford
Former Ambassador to Syria

John Hannah
Former Assistant for National Security Affairs to the Vice President

Ambassador James Jeffrey
Former Ambassador to Turkey and Iraq

Aaron Lobel
Founder and President, America Abroad Media

Mary Beth Long
Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

Alan Makovsky
Former Senior Professional Staff Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee

Denise Natali
Director and Distinguished Research Fellow, Center for Strategic Research at the Institute for National Strategic Studies

Ray Takeyh
Former Senior Advisor on Iran, U.S. State Department

General Charles Wald (ret., USAF)
Former Deputy Commander, U.S. European Command
Former Commander, U.S. Central Command Air Forces

STAFF

Blaise Misztal
Director of National Security

Nicholas Danforth
Senior Policy Analyst

Jessica Michek
Policy Analyst

Executive Summary

The United States has reached a critical moment in its policy approach to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq at the same time as President Donald Trump is overhauling his foreign policy team. This moment requires careful reflection on U.S. interests in the Middle East and the threats they face, as well as a reassessment of the strategic options for advancing them. The president's decision on the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has dominated the discussion in Washington. But recent events also reinforce the need for a U.S. strategy for the broader challenge Iran poses. Regardless of how the White House chooses to address Iran's nuclear program, the need to respond to Iran's regional influence will remain as compelling as ever.

The most crucial and most immediate choices will involve U.S. policy in Syria. In the coming months, Washington will likely be forced to determine (a) how to respond to the potential for direct conflict between Israel and Iran; (b) whether U.S. forces currently in northeastern Syria should withdraw; (c) what kind of role the United States intends to play in diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the conflict; and, potentially, (d) whether to launch additional strikes in response to further provocations from the Assad regime. These decisions, in turn, will shape the future of the Middle East well beyond Syria.

Today, the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate lies in ruins and its fighters have mostly scattered. Still, other jihadist organizations remain present on the battlefield, and continuing military pressure is needed to keep the Islamic State, or ISIS, from reconstituting. Meanwhile, Iran and its allies have benefited from ISIS's decline: Not only have they seized more territory, but they have evinced a more aggressive posture, launching probing attacks against U.S. and Israeli positions.

Iran's regional strength during the Islamic Republic era has never been greater. In recent years, Iran has increased its already considerable influence in Beirut, Lebanon; Damascus, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq; and Sana'a, Yemen. Iran's commitment to spreading its influence by means of local proxies, predominantly within Shiite communities, has contributed to sectarian radicalization and has deepened regional conflicts. As states in the region have unraveled, Iran has worked to expand its influence by exacerbating their unraveling. U.S. allies and partners fear that they will be Iran's next targets.

★ ★ ★

Iran's commitment to spreading its influence by means of local proxies, predominantly within Shiite communities, has contributed to sectarian radicalization and has deepened regional conflicts.

In short, however the president chooses to address the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, it will be just one part of a broader challenge. Iran poses a significant threat to Middle Eastern order and directly threatens U.S. allies across the region. Returning some measure of stability to the increasingly fractured Middle East—a vital and enduring U.S. national security interest—requires confronting the spread of Iran's influence.

Beyond the debate over renewing the JCPOA, the administration has given indications of its desire to tackle Iranian influence more broadly.[1] But in its words and actions, the White House has also given mixed signals as to how it would go about doing so.

In a speech at Stanford University earlier this year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson argued that the United States must remain militarily and diplomatically engaged in Syria in order to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS and as a check on Iranian expansion in the region.[2] Similarly, Tillerson's successor, Mike Pompeo, has previously argued that the United States must "raise the cost" of Iranian adventurism.[3] Most recently, before launching strikes against Syria, President Trump himself declared Iran "responsible for backing Animal Assad" and warned there would be a "big price to pay."[4]

Yet so far, the policies that the administration has laid out for Syria diverge from these goals. A limited series of airstrikes launched in mid-April targeted the Assad regime's chemical-weapons facilities while avoiding Iranian targets.[5] At the same time, the president has declared his desire to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria following the defeat of ISIS, indicating a six-month timetable for doing so.[6]

There are a range of possible approaches to the Iranian challenge. But to be effective, Washington has to coordinate its ambitions with its actions, in Syria, Iraq, and across the Middle East. This paper presents three options for leveraging U.S. engagement in Syria and Iraq in order to stabilize the

region in the face of Iranian aggression. Inspired by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1953 "Project Solarium" exercise, the Bipartisan Policy Center's Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East evaluates each option in light of rival interpretations of Iran's capabilities and vulnerabilities. Ultimately, it leaves policymakers to choose among these options based on their answers to two questions: (1) How dire is the current Iranian threat? and (2) How aggressive are Iran's goals? However policymakers view these questions, it is critical that they choose and implement one or a combination of the below strategies if they intend to check Iran's power.

The task force believes that Iran's regional behavior is destabilizing, a threat to both U.S. interests and allies. The task force further believes that the United States must play a key role in responding to this threat and that doing so will require a far more comprehensive policy than Washington, which is understandably focused on reining in Iran's nuclear program and defeating ISIS, has so far pursued. The three policy options offer varying approaches to this problem—each with their own pros and cons; task force members have different views on which would be most effective—but all converge on the need for U.S. leadership and long-term engagement in the region. To protect U.S. interests, Washington must now pick a course and pursue it systematically.

The task force believes that Iran's regional behavior is destabilizing, a threat to both U.S. interests and allies. The task force further believes that the United States must play a key role in responding to this threat and that doing so will require a far more comprehensive policy than Washington has so far pursued.

Policy Options:

Rollback: The most aggressive option, rollback would keep regime/Iranian forces away from the borders of Turkey, Israel, and Jordan—all U.S. allies. This would involve renewed pressure on Iran's presence in Syria by U.S.-supported proxies and direct U.S. military action where necessary. Rollback would also involve a concerted push to check Iranian military power in Iraq through support of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraqi Sunnis, and anti-Iranian Shiite actors. Finally, it would involve highlighting the regime's domestic vulnerabilities in order to undermine its capacity for regional power projection and show solidarity with Iranians seeking democratic change.

Containment: Containment would involve defending U.S. gains in eastern Syria and using that foothold to provide a credible deterrent and clear redlines against Iran using Syria as a base to launch attacks against U.S. allies. In Iraq, containment would entail continued political support for the Abadi government in order to encourage its independence from Tehran as well as attempts to gain control of Shiite militias and a robust effort to reconcile Baghdad and Erbil.

Modus Vivendi: Modus vivendi would be a form of tense coexistence based on translating U.S. leverage into a diplomatic outcome that de-escalates the conflict among Syria, Iran, and Russia, on the one hand, and Syrian Sunnis rebels and Kurds on the other. The United States would build on this foundation to support a regional modus vivendi that would involve an uneasy balance of power between Iran and the Sunni Arab states. Ultimately, this approach would be predicated on the idea that, with the right mix of pressure and incentives, Iran would accept a more limited but recognized role in the region that is not fundamentally threatening to the interests of the United States and its allies.

The task force is refraining from recommending one policy approach over another, however certain elements are common to all of these approaches. The most important of these is continued U.S. engagement in eastern Syria and political engagement in Iraq in the aftermath of ISIS's defeat. Eastern Syria and western Iraq, both Sunni-dominated, have no apparent heir to power in ISIS's wake. Were the United States to pull up stakes and leave, it seems likely that one of two unwelcome outcomes would result: Pro-Iranian forces would take charge or jihadi forces would.

To forestall such an outcome, the United States will have to maintain its military presence in Syria until there is an acceptable political settlement, and it will have to support the Iraqi government in Baghdad to stem the tide of Iranian influence. The most pivotal region in which United States policy toward Iran will play out is the Syria-Iraq nexus. A comprehensive policy for sustained and effective engagement in both countries is now necessary to stabilize the region in the face of Iranian disruption.

Introduction

The United States has reached a critical moment in its policy approach to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq at the same time as President Donald Trump is overhauling his foreign policy team and deciding on the future of the Iran nuclear deal. Beyond the debate over renewing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the administration has indicated its desire to tackle the Iranian threat more broadly. But in its words and actions, it has also given mixed signals as to how it would go about doing so.

In a speech at Stanford University earlier this year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson argued that the United States must remain militarily and diplomatically engaged in Syria in order to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS and as a check on Iranian expansion in the region. Similarly, Tillerson's successor, Mike Pompeo, has previously said that Iran is a "pernicious empire that is expanding its power and influence across the Middle East," and he argued that the United States must "raise the cost" of Iranian adventurism.[7] Most recently, before launching strikes against Syria, President Trump himself declared Iran "responsible for backing Animal Assad" and warned there would be a "big price to pay."[8]

Yet so far, the policies that the administration has laid out for Syria are not commensurate with these goals. A limited series of airstrikes launched in mid-April targeted the regime's chemical-weapons facilities while avoiding Iranian targets. At the same time, the president has declared his desire to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria following the defeat of ISIS, indicating a six-month timetable for doing so.

The administration's May 12 decision on the future of the JCPOA will mark a vital moment of reflection on U.S. interests in the Middle East and the threats they face, as well as a reassessment of the strategic options for advancing them. In its first paper, *Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost*, the Bipartisan Policy Center's Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East laid out the importance of confronting the spread of Iranian influence across an increasingly shattered Middle East in order to preserve U.S. strategic interests.[9] This paper explores the nature of that challenge in greater depth. To do so, it first reviews the strategic landscape as it currently stands. Then, using President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Project Solarium" exercise as a model, the paper lays out the broad strategic options available to American policymakers: rollback, containment, and modus vivendi.

In 1953, Eisenhower ordered the "Solarium Project," a secret exercise for the purpose of determining U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War.[10] In effect, three teams of foreign policy experts were each assigned three separate policies. Each team was told to make the best possible case as to why their assigned policy was the best for the United States to pursue. Upon conclusion of the process, Eisenhower instructed the National Security Council to integrate the best elements of each into a policy document. This marked the beginning of a months-long process that ultimately resulted in National Security Council document 162/2, "Basic National Security Policy."[11] As historians Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman point out, "the ultimate influence of the detailed [Solarium] task force reports appears to have been mainly the discussions they generated."[12]

In a similar manner, it is the task force's hope that the three "ideal-type" strategic options for confronting Iranian influence in the Middle East presented here might prove useful as the Trump administration develops and refines its approach to Iran.

Background

Figure 1. The Middle East Region

Source: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018.

Before beginning this exercise, it is critical to define core U.S. interests and goals as they apply to Iran as well as where they coincide with or differ from those of U.S. regional partners.

U.S. Interests

In arguing for a strategy aimed at achieving "sustainable order at sustainable cost" in the Middle East, this task force identified the core U.S. interests in the region as: opposing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the spread of terrorism; protecting the U.S. homeland; supporting allies; and ensuring freedom of navigation and the flow of energy from the Persian Gulf.[13]

The most important challenge facing U.S. policy—crucial to protecting the homeland and U.S. allies, as well as limiting Iranian influence—is to ensure Iran remains non-nuclear. A nuclear Iran would pose a severe challenge to U.S. interests and to the Middle East. A related core interest is to

deny Iran the ability to project power outside its region against the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies, either through conventional means—for example, through the development of an enhanced naval capability and intercontinental ballistic missiles—or through terrorist operations.

Alongside keeping Iran non-nuclear, the United States has core regional interests that could conflict with Iranian goals. These include keeping the Persian Gulf safe for the transport of energy; maintaining freedom of navigation in the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula; preventing Iran from subverting Arab regimes; and ensuring the security of Israel and other U.S. partners. An important element of the last item is supporting efforts to deny Iran ease of access to Hezbollah, the Lebanese terrorist organization, particularly for the provision of arms.

A subsidiary but important goal for U.S. policy is to stem the growing tide of Iran's regional successes for the sake of altering its "victorious" image. Unless this goal is achieved, the current regional perception of Iran as inexorably increasing its influence could lead regional states either to begin to accommodate themselves to Iran's dominance or, alternatively, to lash out at Iran unwisely and in a manner uncoordinated with the United States. In the long or even medium term, preventing Iran from expanding its influence in the region at America's expense will be necessary for Washington to maintain the leverage necessary to check Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Iran's Strategic Objectives

Iran's current strategic objectives are fundamentally at odds with those of the United States. As defined by its current regime, Iran's overarching strategic goals can be boiled down to: (1) preserve the regime, (2) become the dominant political and security broker in the region, and (3) lead the resistance against the United States and Israel, in that order.

Regarding the first goal, Iran is not unusual. It is a virtual truism that any regime puts self-preservation ahead of all other goals and will expend all necessary resources on behalf of that goal.[14] Yet Iran, whether driven by ideological zeal or a strategy of defense in depth, also seeks to spread its influence and ultimately its revolution across borders. Henry Kissinger famously suggested that Iran must decide if it is a nation or a cause. Iran behaves like a country with a cause, and that cause—whatever it is—produces an expansionist policy. Forty years into the Iranian revolution, and Tehran has not abandoned its revolutionary objectives in order to embrace a more traditional state-centered approach to diplomacy. On the contrary, Iran's investment in sub-state actors, as discussed below, is intensifying and diversifying.

Iran's third strategic goal is to be the leader of the resistance against the United States and Israel. The nominal aim of expelling Americans from the Middle East may be largely theoretical. Still, a key and consistent component of the Iranian worldview since 1979 has been that the United States is the architect and bulwark of an anti-Iranian regional order, which includes Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States, and that the United States must therefore be driven from the region for the sake of Iran's security. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has consistently claimed that the United States will never accept Iran's Islamic revolution.[15]

Resistance to Israel is also inextricable from Iran's regional expansionist aims. But Iran pursues its anti-Israel policies with sufficient determination to set it apart from its policies toward its other neighbors. There is probably no arena in which Iran has expended more attention and resources, in the face of greater challenges, than in southern Lebanon. And Iran's deep involvement in Syria is motivated in large part by its commitment to feeding and bolstering its southern Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.

To be fair, there are other explanations for Iranian support for Hezbollah, and perhaps there is an argument to be made that Iran ultimately will come to terms with Israel's existence. Still, though hard-liners and moderates in the leadership of the Islamic Republic over the years have disagreed about many things, neither side has ever suggested that the existence of the state of Israel is acceptable. Moreover, Iran has been willing to transcend its generally Shiite orientation for the purpose of targeting Israel, as has been the case with its extensive relationship with Hamas and other Palestinian extremist groups.

Attitudes of U.S. Partners

U.S.-aligned, Sunni-led Arab regimes—including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—are deeply concerned by Iran's ongoing regional activities and its growing momentum, as well as by the specific military threats it presents. They see the combination of the

Islamic Republic's interference and subversion throughout the region and its revolutionary ideology as evidence of Tehran's determination to exert influence over the entire Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, over the past decade, America's Sunni Arab allies have expressed concern about what they see as a pattern of declining U.S. attention to their regional security.[16]

Iran's advances in recent years have only reinforced Sunni Arabs' preexisting distrust of the Tehran regime. Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which led to the emergence of a Shia-dominant government in Baghdad, Iran emerged as the leading regional political power in Baghdad, which prior to the invasion had long been under the sway of minority Sunni rulers. The outbreak of civil war in Syria and Iran's crucial political and military support of Syria's Bashar Al Assad has given it an even stronger position in that country. In Yemen, following the chaos that emerged with the Arab Spring, a long-simmering Houthi rebellion gained steam to the point that, in 2014, Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, creating yet another—a fourth—Arab capital where Iranian influence reigns supreme.[17] It is likely that Iran is also engaged in subversive activities among the Sunni-ruled Shia majority in Bahrain, and Saudi Arabian leaders suspect that Iranians are likewise involved in Saudi Arabia's Shia majority in the Eastern Province.[18]

As a result, the Iranian 21st-century box-score, from the Arab viewpoint, is a depressing spectacle. In recent years, Iran has increased its already considerable influence in Beirut, Lebanon; Damascus, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq; and Sana'a, Yemen. Iran's regional influence during the Islamic Republic era has never been higher. The Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini view is that their countries could be next and that Iran seeks to weaken or perhaps even destroy their regimes. Aside from subversion, their biggest military concerns are Iran's growing missile arsenal and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy, either of which could be deployed to attack their oil installations or to close the strategically important Straits of Hormuz. It is unlikely they fear a cold-start conventional attack, as Iran is unable to project power in that manner across the Gulf. Perhaps more than its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council states, Saudi Arabia sees Iran's relations with the Houthis in Yemen as part of an effort to encircle it.

Over the past decade, the Sunni Arab states have also said that they are concerned about what they believe is a pattern of declining U.S. attention to their security. Although many welcomed the president's visit in spring 2017 and the associated announcements about forthcoming U.S. arms sales, they have grown increasingly restive about the pace of fulfillment.[19] The lack of clarity about U.S. long-term policy in Syria and Iraq after the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa has fed the continued concern that the United States is less committed to the region's security than it has been in the past.

Israel also shares the Sunni Arabs' concerns about Iran's steady advances in the region and has an equally dire estimation of Iran's ultimate goals. Just as Saudi Arabia fears that Iran will not rest until it has taken Mecca and Medina, so Israel believes that it is solidly within Tehran's crosshairs. However, while the Sunni Gulf states are worried about the broad range and geographic scope of Iranian activities, Israel's fears are much more focused.

For the last five years, Israel has watched with growing concern as Iranian forces and proxies have played an increasingly prominent role on the Syrian battlefield, advanced their positions closer to the Israeli border, grown battle-hardened, and acquired advanced weaponry from Tehran. Of particular concern to Israel is the outsized role that Hezbollah—the Iran-supported, Lebanese Shiite terrorist organization that Israel fought a 2006 war against—has played in Syria. Serving as the Assad regime's shock troops under the direction of the IRGC, Hezbollah has gained valuable combat experience, making it a much tougher foe in what Israel views as a looming future conflict. And, as the Assad regime, backed by Iranian and Iranian-supported boots on the ground and Russian air support, has consolidated its control over the majority of Syria and pushed opposition groups into isolated pockets, Israel fears that Hezbollah and other Iranian-aligned militias will assume positions along Israel's borders. It is for this reason that Israel strongly opposed a cease-fire deal for southwestern Syria that was struck by the United States and Russia in July 2017: It did not specifically exclude Iranian-backed forces from the de-escalation zones established along Israel's borders.[20]

Perhaps of even greater concern is the ongoing proliferation of advanced weapons and technology to Hezbollah.[21] By summer 2017, Israel grew increasingly alarmed at the prospect not just of Iran's continued supply of rockets and missiles to Hezbollah—the group is already estimated to possess an arsenal of more than 100,000 such weapons—but of Tehran giving the group the technology to build precision-guided munitions. In June 2017, Major General Herzl Halevi, the director of Israeli Military Intelligence, warned in a public speech, "Over the last year, Iran has been working to set up independent production facilities for precise weaponry in Lebanon and Yemen."[22] Though Israel has largely remained on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict, it has sought to deny Hezbollah the arms that would pose the greatest threat to Israel, conducting repeated airstrikes to that effect.[23] In late 2017, an Iranian drone incursion into Israel prompted a sudden escalation, with Israel launching a wide-ranging strike that destroyed much of

Syria's air defenses at the cost of one Israeli plane. This, coupled perhaps with Israel's recent declassification of information about its 2007 strike on a nuclear reactor in Syria, suggests Israel may now be launching more aggressive efforts to target Hezbollah and Iranian activities in Syria.[24]

Iranian Vulnerabilities

Despite the regional perception of an ascendant Iran, Tehran is not without its weaknesses. Indeed, particularly when compared with the military, economic, and political power wielded by the United States, Iran has significant vulnerabilities that could be exploited as part of any strategy to counter its regional aggression. Since the beginning of 2018, massive anti-regime protests not just in Tehran but across the country, as well as an ongoing currency crisis, serve as only the most dramatic evidence of the challenges Iran may face on the home front as it seeks to maintain its aggressive posture abroad.[25]

Political Vulnerabilities

A potential vulnerability is the attitude of the Iranian public toward the regime itself. There is sound basis for believing that there is considerable popular disaffection for the regime, mainly based on the reality of clerical dominance and human rights abuses. Some serious scholars are convinced that the contradictions and cruelties of a regime that promises both God's rule and democracy—and that transparently fails on both counts—will eventually stoke popular anger sufficient to overturn the Islamic Republic.[26] Others suggested that the opposite may be taking place: that the Iranian public is becoming increasingly demoralized and depoliticized, making popular democratic movements even less likely. With reformists in government failing to deliver and the regime consistently meeting protests with violent force, "fear has caused the Iranian public to see democracy as a luxury that is too costly to afford."[27]

Still, Iran's recent history gives cause for hope. Iran's 2009 election, most notably, sparked mass demonstrations, as the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was rapidly declared the victor over the reformist candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi—so rapidly that the result was nearly universally rejected as pre-cooked.[28] The demonstrations were brutally suppressed by the police and the Basij militia, resulting in dozens of deaths and thousands of arrests. Many interpreted the regime reaction as a sign of insecurity.

Protests broke out again in December 2017. The scale of the protests, as well as the speed with which they appeared to turn directly hostile to the regime, suggests that while their causes are still not fully understood, the regime's base of support is far shakier than once assumed. A considerable number of people—not just the middle-class supporters of the Green Revolution but a more geographically and socioeconomically diverse segment of society—nurse fierce grievances over the way their country has been governed. Even if unemployment and material deprivation represented the spark of the anger, for many protesters it appeared couched in a more fundamental critique of unmet expectations, specifically the role of regime's corruption, favoritism, and misplaced priorities in perpetuating the country's problems.

While this round of protests eventually subsided in the face of forceful repression, the underlying issues remain alive and smaller demonstrations continue. What's more, while the regime's willingness to use force in suppressing popular dissent was never questioned, their relatively quick and peaceful conclusion left open the question of whether some components of the regime's repressive apparatus might not be completely committed to fulfilling their duties in a more sustained conflict with the public. Specifically, the working-class nature of the protests raises the question of whether groups like the Basij, which draw heavily on this segment of society, might side with the people in future periods of unrest.

Alongside the conflict between the regime and the people, there are also conflicts inside the regime that have come to the fore recently and may well intensify with the struggle over who will succeed the aging supreme leader. One need not draw clean lines between "moderate" or "reformist" regime figures and "hard-line" regime figures to recognize that these divisions, as revealed by the Green Revolution and Iran's 2017 presidential election, are real. As many observers noted, in the final stages of the 2017 election, Rouhani began attacking his opponent, Ebrahim Raisi, the perceived front-runner to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khameini, in a way that made it seem he was actually running against the regime itself. He alluded to Raisi's involvement in a series of brutal post-revolutionary tribunals and implied that he, Rouhani, could be a champion for the people and their liberties. At his most confrontational, he asserted, "The Iranian people will reject those who in the last 38 years have known nothing but being executioners and jailers."[29]

Even if figures like current President Hassan Rouhani support many dangerous aspects of Iran's regional agenda—including hostility toward Israel, support for Assad, and an ultimate belief in the legitimacy and importance of Iran's nuclear program—differences in the priority they place on it in regard to other goals, as well as differences on the domestic agenda, could still open fissures within the Iranian ruling class. Moreover, these divisions could be exacerbated by tensions between the regime and the people if figures like Rouhani believe they can gain popular support by adopting specific policies and then use this support to enhance their position in intra-regime rivalries. On foreign policy, for example, Rouhani framed his support for the nuclear deal in terms of the domestic economic benefits it could provide to the Iranian people rather than opposition to Iran's nuclear program per se. Similarly, the most popular critiques of Iran's nefarious regional role have not involved foreign policy concerns at all, but rather the suggestion that they are coming at the expense of the Iranian people's welfare. A number of protest slogans reflect this "guns versus butter" framing, such as "Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, My soul is devoted to Iran," or, as was chanted at a Rouhani rally in Isfahan, "Forget Syria, take care of us."[30]

The potential role of such fissures was also reinforced by protests in early 2018. Initial reports suggested that popular demonstrations had been started by hard-liners trying to discredit Rouhani by highlighting his failure to deliver the economic benefits he promised from the JCPOA.[31] Subsequently, different members of the regime offered different responses to the protesters: Ayatollah Khamenei insisted they were the product of foreign interference, while Rouhani showed a greater willingness to acknowledge the substance of the protesters' dissatisfaction.[32] The biggest vulnerability for the regime might well be a situation in which popular anger at the regime grows, and some of its members, instead of closing ranks, recognize that their political interests, or the regime's survival, would be best served by accommodating this anger rather than by repressing it.

Minorities

Iran's ethnic minorities constitute a vulnerability of sorts. Only half the country, or slightly more, is ethnically Persian. The next largest group, the Azeris—a Turkic group of the same ethnicity and language as the dominant group in bordering Azerbaijan—constitute a quarter of the population. Kurds are 7 percent of the population and Arabs only 3 percent. Religiously, Iran is 89 percent Shia, with Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchs comprising virtually all the Sunnis.[33]

At first blush, the Azeris may seem to present a tempting target for foreigners seeking to stir the pot of anti-regime activity—especially given the independence of a nearby state of co-ethnics—but that is a questionable proposition. Some Azeris are known to favor greater local and linguistic freedoms, but Azeris overall are quite well-integrated in Iran. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is famously himself Azeri.[34]

Having cooperated with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Kurds are probably the minority least trusted by the Tehran regime, and the dominant Kurdish separatist group, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, announced a return to "armed struggle" last year after a 25-year cease-fire.[35] Another Kurdish resistance group, the Kurdistan Free Life Party, is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (and, accordingly, was designated by the Treasury Department as a "terrorism-supporting entity" under Executive Order 13224 in 2009). The Kurds, however, seem neither to be large enough nor united enough to present a serious threat to the regime. Yet Iran's unbridled anger about the Iraqi Kurds' September 2017 independence referendum (and subsequent Iranian measures against the Iraqi Kurds, including most notably support for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) attack on Kurdish-held disputed territories) is a measure of Tehran's ongoing paranoia about restlessness among its own Kurds.[36]

The Arabs are a small population and generally proved themselves to be loyal to the regime during the Iran-Iraq War. A militant Arab group, the Ahwazi Arabs, based in the Arab-majority southwest, is largely inert. Jundullah, the Sunni, mainly Baluchi terrorist group—so designated by the State Department in 2010—and its several breakaway cells have carried out some bloody operations, including against the IRGC, but it does not represent a threat to regime stability.

In short, ethnic minorities in Iran nurse grievances about underdevelopment, heavy-handed control by the central government, and limits on linguistic rights, but they do not currently seem to represent a threat to the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, attempting to agitate minority movements to increase the threat they pose to the Islamic Republic may carry with it consequences that would be hard to predict or control.

Economic Vulnerabilities

The impact of U.S. sanctions on Iran, and the role of economic concerns in recent protests, demonstrate the extent to which Iran's economy represents one of the regime's principal weaknesses. America's centrality to the international financial system and its influential role in international institutions—including the United Nations Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering—provide enormous leverage over Iran.

Since the lifting of sanctions and the full resumption of oil sales resulting from the JCPOA, the Iranian economy has grown, although not as explosively as Iran may have expected and some may have feared. Growth in the Iranian economy, according to the World Bank, bounced back from a contraction of close to 2 percent in 2015 to 6.4 percent in 2016, with growth rates expected to decrease to slightly above 4 percent for 2017-2019.[37] However, Iran remains a lower-middle-income country, and, given its dependence on oil sales and depressed oil prices, it remains highly vulnerable to market vicissitudes.[38] Moreover, it badly needs foreign investment and know-how to develop its gas fields and oilfields. That makes its economy vulnerable not only to the resumption of sanctions, but potentially to the very *threat* of resumed sanctions, even unilateral U.S. sanctions.

In recent months, the challenges facing Iran's economy have been laid bare.[39] The rial has lost roughly a third of its value since the beginning of 2018, with fears about its future rising sharply in early April. With Iranians lining up to exchange their currency for dollars and euros, and banks unable to meet the demand, the Iranian government has sought to fix the exchange rate and impose stiff penalties on black-market traders. Regardless of how effective these efforts prove to be in the face of continued uncertainty about U.S. sanctions policy, this fundamental economic weakness, and its potential political ramifications, will continue to plague the regime.

Military Vulnerabilities

Iran's military vulnerabilities fall into two broad categories. First and most important is its enduring conventional weakness vis-à-vis the United States. Put simply, in a conventional confrontation, there is little doubt that U.S. forces would emerge victorious. Iran's outdated F-4 Phantom fighters, for example, are vastly inferior to the F-22s and F-16s that the U.S. Air Force would rely on in any hypothetical conflict, enabling the United States to achieve rapid air superiority.

They are also inferior to the air assets of America's allies in the region, such as the United Arab Emirates' F-16 Block 60 fighters, meaning that U.S. allies could potentially also defeat Iran in direct air engagement. Indeed, Iran's enormous investment in asymmetric resources are largely devoted to compensating for this enduring vulnerability. And yet here, too, intensified U.S. efforts to counter Iran's asymmetric tactics further secure its conventional advantage. In the Persian Gulf, for example, the United States deployed a prototype for ship-based laser weapons to defeat Iran's naval-swarm tactics.[40]

Second, a major conflict could expose more fundamental weaknesses within the Iranian military than it could otherwise conceal. For all the attention paid to the IRGC, this elite force operates in sometimes uneasy harmony with the larger conventional army, called the Artesh. This relationship could "create inefficiencies, violate unity of command, and promote factionalism," leading to "poor coordination [and] lack of integration," particularly in the case of the Artesh-run Strategic Air Defense.[41] There are also rumors of divisions within the IRCG itself; in 2010, for example, a high-ranking IRCG general who defected claimed that over a third of the elite unit were in fact "against the regime."[42]

Taken together, these vulnerabilities offer a reminder as to why analysts assume that the Iranian government would seek to avoid an open, full-scale conflict with the United States while playing to the strength of its nonconventional forces around the region.

Strategic Landscape

Iran continues to make progress on its long-standing desire to spread its influence, if not export its Islamic Revolution, across the Middle East. The turmoil that seized the region in 2011 provided Iran with new opportunities to deepen its existing partnerships and to find new partners and proxies. This is most apparent in Syria and Iraq, but Iran's destabilizing activities extend across the whole region, including as far afield as Yemen.

Iraq

Iran has long pursued an aggressive agenda in Iraq. Since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran has supported and funded paramilitary organizations operating in Iraq, including the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, all Shiite-led militias with direct ties to the IRGC, despite constant denials from the Iranian government of its involvement.[43] Numerous fighters from these groups have become embedded in the ISF, dramatically expanding Iran's opportunity for influence within the country, its government, and society.[44] Estimates place the number of fighters within these ranks as high as 55,000, illustrating the lengths Iran has gone to acquire the power to transform into influence.[45] Iran also wields considerable influence in the Iraqi political system through the Dawa Party, a Shia majority political party that held a plurality of seats in parliament from 2006 until 2014 and that elected both Nouri al-Maliki and Haider Abadi as prime minister.[46]

Despite clear support aimed at the Shia in Iraq, Iran has attempted to diversify its activities—for example, by also supporting Christian militias fighting against ISIS or maintaining links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[47] In the economic realm, Iran has flooded the Iraqi market with food and supplies, controlling large swaths of industry and agriculture throughout the country, so much so that a majority of products available in Iraq are Iranian.[48] Wealthy real-estate developers have strong ties to Tehran, and the illicit drug trade now primarily runs through Iran.[49] Iranian-friendly television and radio stations produce segments intended to present a positive view of its engagement in Iraq and to criticize the presence of the U.S. military there.[50]

Since 2014, Iran has significantly contributed to the fight against the Islamic State, providing vital weaponry to the Kurdish fighters near Mosul along with technical assistance and advice to the Iraqi government.[51] Media reports suggest that IRGC soldiers have directly engaged the terrorist group throughout Iraq, a claim that Tehran has vehemently denied; however, members of Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah fought alongside Iraqi military forces and independent Kurdish forces fought against the Islamic State.[52] According to American military officials, Iran established a forward airbase in 2014 in Iraq in which armed drones were used to target a small number of Islamic State fighters; the United States has recently authenticated the existence of these drones in southeastern Syria near the Iraq border.[53]

In the past year, Iran has sought to use the defeat of ISIS and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) independence referendum as opportunities to consolidate its control, principally through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iranian-backed, predominantly Shiite militias that were crucial to recapturing Mosul and driving the KRG out of Kirkuk. The crucial question now is: what role the PMF militias will continue to play? Will they emerge as important powerbrokers following the country's May elections, or will they be incorporated into the formal structure of the Iraqi army under the control of the country's elected government? Early indications suggest the former outcome, with Shiite militias making bold claims about their ability and desire to drive Iraqi politics in an overtly anti-American direction. In February 2018, Ahl Al Haq called on the next Iraqi government to "expel the American forces from Iraq and terminate the strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries."[54]

And yet, there are countervailing forces as well. The religious, political, and cultural differences between Iranians and Iraqi Shia have, if anything, become all the more salient in response to rising Iranian influence in Baghdad. While many Shiite Iraqis, for example, were grateful for the role Iranian-backed PMF units played in defending them from ISIS, they also do not want to become "the 51st state of Iran."[55] In recent years, Washington also lent its support to Saudi Arabian efforts to counter Iranian influence. Following the reopening of a Saudi embassy in Baghdad in 2015, leaders from both countries exchanged reciprocal visits last fall amid promises to increase trade and develop joint infrastructure projects. Tellingly, Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr also met with Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman in summer 2017 after having been an outspoken critic of Iranian influence in the country.[56]

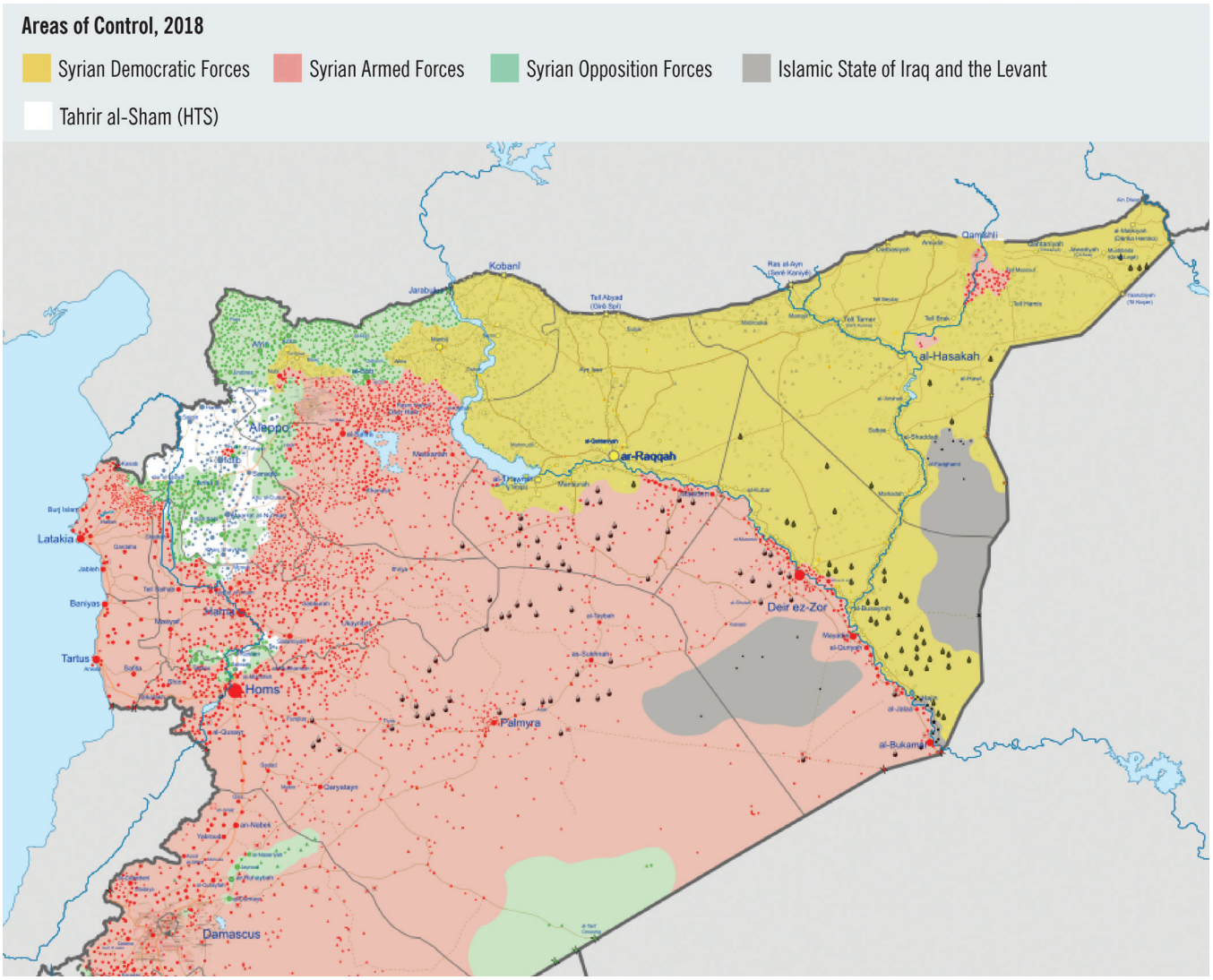
Similar divisions emerged in the aftermath of the KRG independence referendum. While the United States, Turkey, and the Iraqi government all joined with Tehran in making their opposition to a formal KRG declaration of independence clear, it was Iran that subsequently played the crucial role in

undermining the referendum to its own advantage. Following an enthusiastic "yes" vote, Tehran took advantage of splits within the KRG—between the Barzani and Talibani families, but also within the Talibani Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—to facilitate the Iraqi government's occupation of the contested, oil-rich city of Kirkuk.[57] Losing Kirkuk not only brought an end to the economic basis for Kurdish independence, but the manner in which it happened also deepened the crises within the KRG, leading the Barzani camp to accuse the Talibanis of treason. Having shown its ability to successfully deploy military force against a U.S. partner, as well as its political influence over its own partners among the Kurds, Iran turned the referendum crisis to its advantage.

Syria

Iran has long viewed Syria as a critical ally in its campaign to exert influence and power throughout the region after first partnering with the Assad regime in the 1980s. Syria was the lone Arab nation to support Iran during the Iraq-Iran War, cementing its relationship with Tehran and paving the way for continued military and political coordination.[58] Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Iran has intensified its outreach and involvement in Syria, providing valuable military equipment and assistance to Assad, fighting the Islamic State, and directly engaging opposition forces throughout the country.[59]

Figure 2. Areas of Control in the Syrian Civil War



Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2018. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_Civil_War_map.svg

As one of the few non-Sunni governments in the region, the Assad regime has aligned its own priorities with those of Tehran, especially its opposition to Saudi Arabia and Israel and its support of Lebanon and Hezbollah. The geographic location of Syria provides Iran with a crucial avenue to transport weapons and support to Hezbollah and Hamas, something that could now be expedited by a direct land corridor through Iraq to Syria.

The Syrian Civil War brought about an intense escalation of Iranian activity in the country, ensuring the survival of its oldest and strongest regional ally. Since 2011, Iranian officials have provided technical assistance to the Syrian government, produced and shared intelligence reports with the regime, and trained regime forces in both Syria and Iran. Unmanned Iranian drones operate within Syria against opposition forces, supporting and mapping out bombing runs for the Syrian air force, providing valuable intelligence reports on troop strength, and at times bombing coalition forces.[60] Since the beginning of the hostilities, an ongoing Iranian troop build-up has occurred. American officials have estimated that there are 1,500 IRGC currently operating in Syria alongside regime forces, Hezbollah, and local Shiite militias.[61] Over 1,000 IRGC-Quds Force soldiers have been killed in the conflict, including high-ranking commanders overseeing the training and development of the Syrian army.[62]

In 2017, escalation ramped up as Iran expanded its operations in southeastern Syria, directly engaging the United States and coalition forces. Between May and June, it was reported that Shiite militias launched three separate Iranian-made drone attacks near the coalition base at al-Tanf, all of which were shot down by U.S. forces.[63] After an attack in Tehran by the Islamic State, Iran launched a ballistic missile at the group in eastern Syria, prompting fears about possible future Iranian missile attacks at targets across the region.[64]

Now the conflict has moved on to Deir ez-Zor in northeastern Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have seized control of the remaining ISIS-held territories in the country, which include some of Syria's most profitable oil wells along with an important border-crossing with Iraq on the Euphrates River. So far, the two sides have avoided direct conflict, with the river itself appearing to act as a dividing line, but tensions are high, and several violent exchanges have made it clear that the possibility is very real.[65] The United States recently drove off a sustained attack by Iranian and regime-aligned Russian mercenaries, for example, intent on seizing control of a key oil facility northeast of the Euphrates.

Alongside this, conflict between Assad and other rebel forces continues in the territories of Idlib and Ghouta. In Idlib, ongoing conflict between rebel factions coincides with continued resistance to regime forces. Despite negotiations between Turkey and Russia, Turkey appears to have renewed its support for some rebel groups, while Russia's air campaign continues to target the region. The extent to which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham forces emerge in control of the region, combined with the question of whether Turkey will reach a sustainable agreement with Russia and the regime about its future, will determine whether there is a possibility for the United States to confront Iran in northwestern Syria. In Ghouta, a concerted regime push to drive out the last remnants of resistance near Damascus led to a humanitarian catastrophe. The regime's use of chemical weapons in its attack on Ghouta, meanwhile, prompted a punitive military strike by the United States, France, and Britain. The long-term results of this strike on Assad's willingness to use chemical weapons, as well as the course of the war more broadly, remain uncertain at this time.

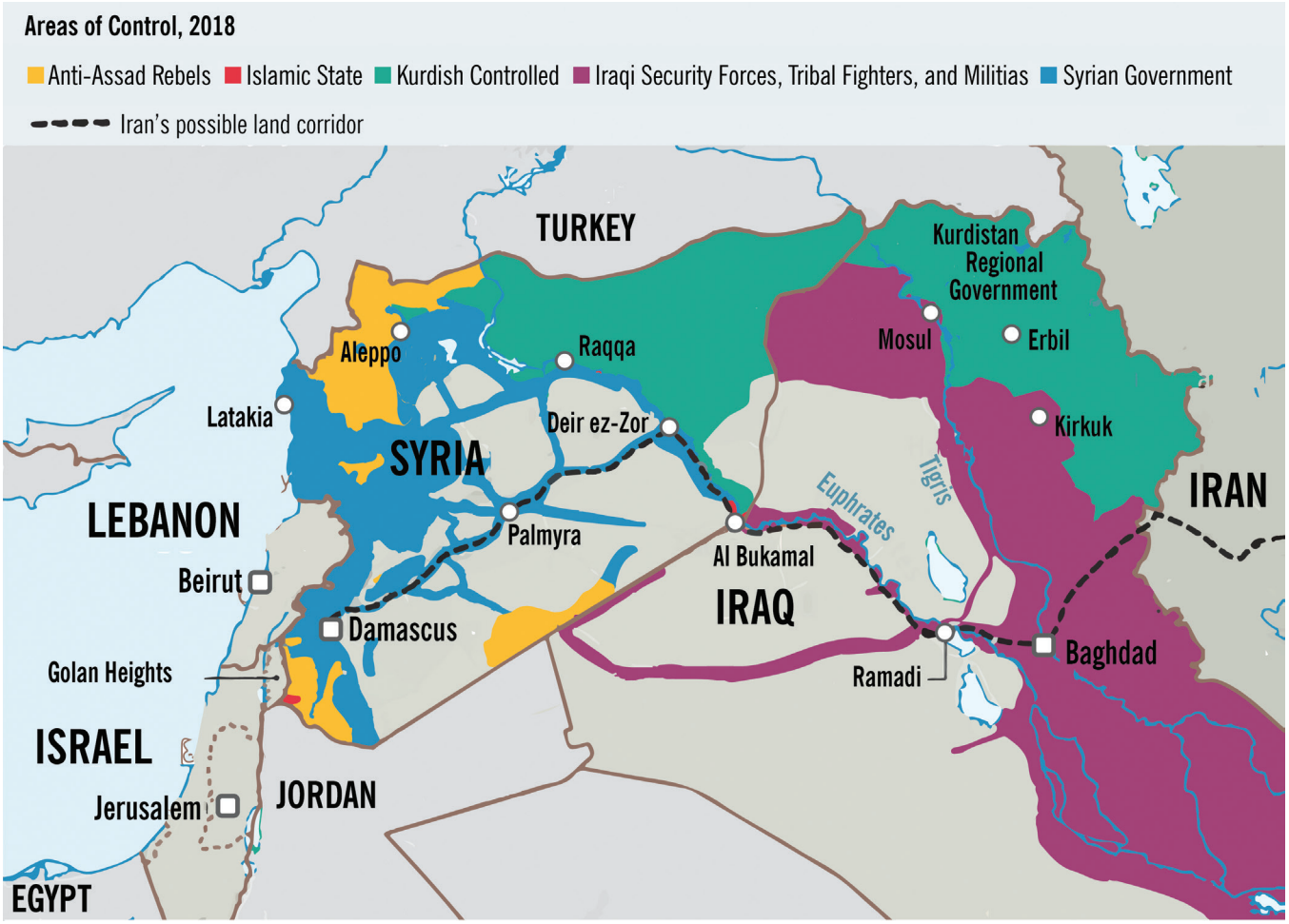
The Russian-led diplomatic process that brought together Iran, Turkey, the Syrian regime, and a changing array of opposition parties appears to have reached a standstill pending further developments on the ground. Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, taking place against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units in the territory of Afrin has further strained and reconfigured relations in the region. Russia, alarmed over the deepening U.S. relationship with the Kurds, has allowed Turkish planes access to Afrin airspace while Iran and the Assad regime appear increasingly concerned about Turkish occupation of Syrian territory. While the Kurds have called on the regime for support against Turkey, they so far appear unwilling to concede their hard-won autonomy to Damascus in return—limiting but not totally forestalling support from the regime.

In short, the situation in Syria remains fluid and explosive. Iranian gains are real, but the obstacles they face in consolidating their victories are as well. In addition to the impact of Russian, Turkish, and Kurdish decisions, the United States now has a stronger on-the-ground presence than at any previous point in the war.

Tehran-to-Beirut Land Corridor

A concern that connects both Iraq and Syria is the establishment of a land corridor connecting Tehran with Damascus, and by extension Beirut, the Golan Heights, and the Mediterranean Sea.

Figure 3. Iranian Land Corridor



Source: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018

Establishing control of a contiguous route across Iraq and Syria, either directly or through proxies, such as the PMF, could facilitate Iran's long-standing efforts to transport men and matériel into the Levant, where they could be used to strengthen Hezbollah and directly threaten Israel. Currently, the struggle over the land corridor is taking place in eastern Syria, where the U.S.-backed SDF stand face to face with Russian- and Iranian-backed regime forces for control across the Euphrates River up to the border-crossing at Abu Kamal.[66]

U.S. cooperation with the SDF in northern Syria has effectively prevented Iran from cooperating with the SDF to use its territory as a land route. For the time being, U.S. support for anti-Assad rebels along the Jordanian border has blocked the more tenuous desert route running through al-Tanf. This leaves Iran with access to a land corridor running south of the Euphrates (see map) but alongside territory where U.S. forces are present. This secures Iran many of the benefits it sought, but it also exposes the corridor to surveillance and interdiction by the United States. Thus, moving forward, the battle over the land corridor will likely involve Iranian efforts to push the United States and the SDF out of Der ez-Zor or, conversely, U.S. efforts to target Iranian infrastructure south of the Euphrates.

Encirclement of U.S. Allies

U.S.-aligned, Sunni-led Arab regimes—including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—are deeply concerned by Iran's ongoing regional activities, its growing momentum, as well as by the specific military threats it presents. They see the combination of the Islamic Republic's interference and subversion throughout the region and its revolutionary ideology as evidence of Tehran's determination to exert influence over the entire Arabian Peninsula.

These concerns are most acutely felt by Saudi Arabia, which sees the Iranian-Houthi link as an effort to encircle it and to undermine its stability. Iranian influence in Yemen through its support for the country's Houthi minority in its civil war against the Saudi Arabian-supported Sunni government has spilled over from Yemen to directly threaten Saudi Arabia.

Beginning in November 2017, Houthi forces have fired SCUD missiles—believed to be provided by Iran—into Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, Houthi missile attacks caused casualties in Saudi Arabia for the first time, when debris from missiles over Riyadh killed one and wounded two others. Of even deeper concern to the United States and Saudi Arabia is the alleged production and sale of anti-ship missiles to the Houthis, providing the rebels with key equipment to carry out large-scale attacks on shipping lanes and naval vessels off the coast of Aden. Without allaying this concern, the United States cannot be said to have deterred Iran to the satisfaction of its main Arab ally in the region.

Israel also shares the Sunni Arabs' concern about Iran's steady advances in the region. For years, Iran has attempted to utilize proxy groups to undermine Israel. Iran reportedly funds, equips, and sends weapons to militant organizations, mainly Hamas, in Palestine and the contested territories to confront Israel. Additionally, Iran is a staunch ally with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another Islamic paramilitary group aligned with Hamas that conducts military operations inside the West Bank and Gaza. These groups provide Iran an opportunity to confront Israel from strategically advantageous positions without directly beginning an armed conflict with Israel and by extension the United States.

Additionally, Israel has watched with growing concern as Iranian forces and proxies have played an increasingly prominent role on the Syrian battlefield. Israel has struck Syria's Tiyas air base, which houses Iranian drone forces, including the Iranian drone shot down by the Israeli air force after traveling into Israeli airspace in February. The drone incident also highlights the concerns of another U.S. ally, Jordan, whose airspace was also violated in the drone's flight. Israel has expressed concern that Iran is seeking to build up a permanent IRGC presence in the country, to be used after the Syrian civil war as part of what Iranian leaders have spoken of as an "axis of resistance" against Israel and the United States.[67] This military build-up is believed to include three main Iranian bases: one near Aleppo in the north and two south of Damascus.

Of particular concern to Israel is the outsized role that Hezbollah, the Iran-supported, Lebanese Shiite terrorist organization that Israel fought a 2006 war against, has played in Syria. Serving as the Assad regime's shock troops under the direction of the IRGC, Hezbollah has gained valuable combat experience that will make it a much tougher foe in what Israel views as a looming future conflict. Of even greater concern has been the ongoing proliferation of advanced weapons and technology to Hezbollah. By the summer of 2017, Israel grew increasingly alarmed at the prospect not just of Iran's continued supply of rockets and missiles to Hezbollah—the group is already estimated to possess an arsenal of more than 100,000 such weapons—but that Tehran was giving the group the technology to build more accurate, precision-guided munitions on their own.

Both Israel and Jordan have lost faith in the ability of Russia, or Russian-backed cease-fire agreements, to prevent Iranian or Iranian-backed forces from advancing all the way to Syria's southern border. From Jordan's perspective, Iran's presence along its border increases the possibility for both direct Iranian attack and potential subversive activities, particularly among the country's Palestinian population. For Israel, the risk lies in Iran deploying its soldiers, missiles, and proxies on the border of the Golan Heights, with the capacity to rapidly reinforce them if necessary. This would transform any future hostilities with Hezbollah into a two-front conflict, or what some have called Israel's "First Northern War."[68]

Strategic Questions

In developing a strategic response to Iran, different interpretations of Iranian position, abilities, and intentions lead to different conclusions. When deciding on a course of action for securing U.S. regional objectives vis-à-vis Iran, policymakers must consider two key questions: First: To what extent does Iran's position in Syria and Iraq threaten U.S. interests and allies? Second: How ambitious are Iran's goals? If the current threat appears unacceptable, a policy of rollback becomes necessary. If the current threat appears manageable, but Iran is able and eager to expand its position, a policy of containment would be necessary. And if the current threat appears manageable and Iran is unlikely to push further, seeking a modus vivendi would become the most suitable policy.

How Dire is the Current Iranian Threat?

In consolidating its control of Syria by way of a decisive Assad victory, Iran would enhance its ability to directly threaten U.S. allies while also burnishing its regional prestige at the expense of the United States. This creates both immediate military threats as well as broader strategic threats; policymakers will be forced to evaluate the severity of each. The greater they judge these threats to be, the more aggressive a response will be required.

The prospect of Iran securing uncontested primacy in Iraq and Syria, and effectively dominating all of the territory in between, has raised alarms in Middle Eastern capitals. But Iran's campaign to cement its sway over western Iraq and eastern Syria has been met with greater calm in Washington, which seems more skeptical about Iran's ability to maneuver in Sunni-dominated territory.[69] Determining which of these reactions to Iran's advances is appropriate should be the primary guiding factor in deciding the nature and forcefulness of the U.S. response.

Dominating the Middle East's heartland could give Iran strategic depth and the capacity and opportunity to project power across the entirety of the region, threatening key U.S. partners, who would suddenly be faced with an Iranian presence directly on their borders. Iran could use the newly established land corridor to proliferate weapons freely to its proxies. It could control territory, and therefore be able to position proxy or even Iranian forces on the borders of several U.S. allies, including Israel and Jordan. As a result of the considerable amounts of military and economic aid provided to Syria, the nation has essentially become Iran's client state, allowing Tehran unfettered access into its political and social arenas. The IRGC operates almost freely throughout the state and does not require Assad's permission before carrying out missions or attacks.[70] Solidifying its position in Yemen would put Iran in a position to threaten shipping at two critical shipping chokepoints, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb. All of these developments would also significantly enhance Iran's reputation and prestige as a regional power and, in equal measure, diminish U.S. standing and credibility in the region.

Perhaps most problematically, tens of millions of Sunnis might soon find themselves under the control of Iranian-allied, Shiite regimes. It was the Iranian-backed sectarian policies of the Maliki government in Iraq that created the conditions for the Islamic State's growth in Iraq. It was the Iranian-backed slaughter of peaceful Sunni protesters by the Assad regime in Syria that launched that country's civil war and created the conditions for the Islamic State's metastasis. Recreating those conditions could undo whatever progress has been made in defeating the Islamic State and would contribute to a vicious cycle of continued Sunni radicalization and terrorism in the Middle East—and, ultimately, Europe and the United State as well. More importantly, Iran's willingness to use its position in Syria to strengthen Hezbollah through the creation of missile-production facilities, combined with its recently demonstrated probing of Israeli airspace, suggests the more direct risks that could emerge from its newfound position in Syria. These threats might be deemed so grave that the United States cannot allow Iran to complete its attempt at dominating Syria and Iraq.

A land corridor would exacerbate U.S. allies' concerns about encirclement, giving Iran another means by which to supply its proxies with arms and other resources. A land corridor could vastly increase the ease and reliability of these efforts. Iranian smuggling would become easier to hide and harder to interdict. Arms shipments hidden in trucks passing through Iranian-controlled territory would present new challenges to U.S. and Israeli efforts to limit them. From the perspective of Israeli and Jordanian officials, a completed Iranian land corridor would leave them face to face with Iranian troops, effectively extending Iran's borders to their own. On the other hand, some analysts have argued that the threat of a land corridor is exaggerated. They note the fact that Iran has currently succeeded in transporting the resources it needs to Syria and Lebanon by air and sea. Furthermore, any land corridor would be forced to cross a wide expanse of desert between Iraq and Syria, giving the U.S. and Israeli air forces ample opportunity to interdict shipments on open terrain. From this perspective, the risks posed by Iran's land corridor could be mitigated at considerably less cost than an effort to hold the entire stretch of Syria's eastern border would entail.

Beyond this, policymakers must evaluate the risk of Iran consolidating control over the stretch of Sunni-inhabited territory between Damascus and Baghdad. As discussed in this task force's previous paper, the continued sectarian oppression of this population will do more than anything else to fuel the emergence of a successor to ISIS in the region. Ceding the Syrian-Iraqi borderland to Iran will thus have long-term consequences not only regionally but potentially globally as well.

Policymakers must also calculate whether Iran's growing presence on the Golan Heights represents a strategic game-changer. Like Hezbollah's entrenched presence in southern Lebanon, Iranian or Iranian backed forces east of the Golan would still be susceptible to Israel's conventional military superiority, particular given the nature of the border. And yet in any potential conflict, the mere presence of these forces would draw away Israeli resources, diluting Israel's advantage in airpower and attenuating its manpower. Just as important, deploying missiles along Israel's Syrian border would substantially increase the magnitude of the threat Iran could pose to Israel's population. This would give Iran an added deterrent capability that could alter Israel's political calculations in future conflicts and raise the costs of Israeli retaliation against future Iranian provocations.

There is also the more difficult to measure political impact of Iran's success in Syria on the region. As noted above, the perception that Iran is "on the march," triumphantly expelling Washington from the Middle East while elevating itself to the position of regional arbitrator, is itself a form of power. The symbolic or psychological impact of Iran's victories, and the precedent set by its clear willingness to sacrifice in defense of its ally in Damascus, risks creating a regional shift that would be difficult to reverse.

Yet, even if Iran were able to cement its control over Iraq and Syria, it is far from clear that this would significantly change its ability to threaten U.S. interests and partners. Iran's deep ties to Hezbollah and support for Hamas have meant that it has effectively been perched on Israel's borders for the better part of three decades already. Meanwhile, the task of actually exerting and maintaining its influence in war-shattered territories, not to mention the funds it will have to devote to reconstruction on behalf of its client regimes, could very well divert Iranian attention and drain its resources for the foreseeable future. In this case, the blood and treasure that the United States and its partners would have to expend to deny Iran a Tehran-to-Beirut land corridor might not be worth the strategic benefit.

It might even be possible that Iran's current position will prove untenable, even absent U.S. intervention; it could be that Iran has overextended itself. Iran has to expend considerable energy on its military activities (mainly through training and assistance to proxies, but also some direct participation) in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This exertion has certainly taken a toll on the country, and the need to maintain its influence and the territories it has won could very well take an even greater toll. After all, the final outcome of Syria is far from clear, with pockets of resistance remaining in the northwest as well a large swath of Kurdish territory in the northeast that could, if afforded support, leave Iran and its partners mired in conflict for some time to come. Yemen remains even more of a quagmire than Syria, with the Saudis seemingly willing to extend the fight indefinitely.

In Iraq, the success of the national army has strengthened the hand of the Abadi government, and prominent Iraqi Shiite leaders, such as al-Sistani and al-Sadr, appear wary of ceding too much influence to Tehran. With Rouhani elected with a mandate to improve Iran's economic situation, it is possible that Tehran will, or can be forced to, focus on "nation-building at home," rather than on continued aggression abroad.

It remains to be seen how these factors, and the aftermath of the KRG independence referendum, will play out in the upcoming Iraqi elections. Washington went along with the Iraqi recapture of Kirkuk partly in the hope that it would strengthen Prime Minister Abadi, giving him the credibility and electoral confidence to maintain his own independent position vis-à-vis Tehran. At the same time, Washington has worked to limit the Iraqi advance after Kirkuk and is pushing for renewed negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad. With KRG airports reopening under Iraqi control and the KRG's main border-crossing still in Kurdish control, the contours of the new status quo are emerging but still uncertain.[71]

Whether elections strengthen Abadi's hand against Tehran and/or help tighten Iran's hold on Baghdad, whether the KRG and the central government can build a new relationship that limits the role for Iranian meddling, and whether the defeat of ISIS ultimately paves the way for national unity will all effect the extent of the threat Washington is facing.

How Aggressive Are Iran's Goals?

There can be no doubt at this point about Iran's desire to spread its influence over a sizable portion of the Middle East. The crucial question is how sizable a portion. Iran has invested significant amounts of both blood and treasure to ensure that it is able to determine the course of events in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. To a lesser extent, it has sought to establish a beachhead in Yemen. And it has sought out links to groups in the Gaza Strip, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the region. The pressing question for analysts, however, is whether Iran will be satisfied with the territory and influence that it has already accumulated or whether Tehran is determined to push even further.

If Iran sees its revolution and, therefore, its ambition as pan-Islamic, as U.S. partners in the region certainly believe, then it might very well set its sights beyond Damascus and Baghdad. Such an aggressive Iranian posture would demand a more forceful U.S. policy to arrest its momentum and prevent it from further expanding its influence. Most commonly, Iran's objective—and the area in which it has established its preeminence—is referred to as the "Shiite crescent," suggesting that Iran is positioning itself as the chief patron and protector of the region's Shiite minorities. And, indeed, the terrorist groups and proxies with which Iran most commonly works are themselves Shia. But, as the constitution of the Islamic Republic makes clear, Iran is concerned with the entire Islamic world. Article 11 states that "all Muslims form a single nation and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required to base its overall politics on the merging and unity of the Muslim nations. It must continuously strive to achieve the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Muslim world." Article 152 cites "the defense of the rights of all Muslims" as one of the principles of Iranian foreign policy.[72]

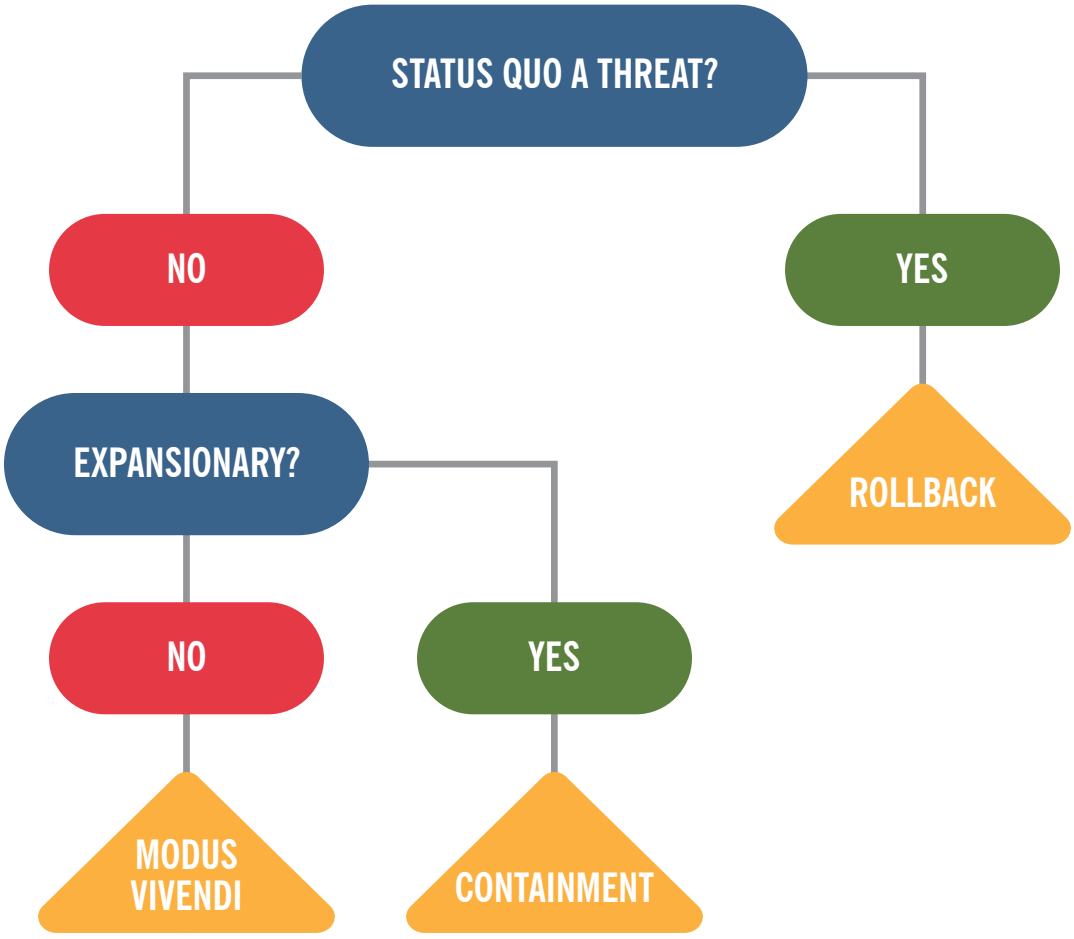
Yet Iran's efforts to build on its religious ideology to advance its goals, particularly beyond the Shiite world, has shown its limits. Hamas was a key client until its support of the Sunni opposition in Syria led Iran drastically to diminish, if not fully cease, its aid. Over the past year, as Hamas officially distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, Iranian assistance has reportedly been on the rise again.[73] Sudan was a reliable Iranian client/ally for roughly a quarter-century and long served as an important conduit of Iranian arms to Hamas, via the Sinai. Apparently using its own resources, however, Saudi Arabia succeeded in persuading Khartoum to end that relationship. Sudan joined Saudi Arabia's anti-Houthi effort in Yemen in 2015 and officially cut ties with Iran in January 2016.

The challenges Iran has faced in dealing with some of these groups highlight the limits of Islamic ideology and raise an alternative possibility. While Iran may harbor pan-Islamic regional fantasies, if the primary force behind its regional activities is a more pragmatic desire for defense in depth against foreign powers, then establishing a stable modus vivendi may be possible.[74]

In the Iran-Iraq War, post-revolutionary Iran found itself both regionally and globally isolated in the face of an Iraqi invasion and chemical-weapons attacks. Since then, the Iranian government has sought partners among non-state actors and worked to subvert regional governments, seeing this as a means to counter its regional isolation and conventional weakness. While Iran's rivals now see this strategy as having been so successful as to tip the balance of power against them, Iran focusing on the conventional power of the many state actors arrayed against it may well mean that Iran still believes it is on the defensive. Similarly, Iran's enthusiastic backing for Assad's violent crimes have often led the country to be cast in the role of the aggressor in Syria's civil war. Yet from Iran's point of view, the United States, Turkey, and the Gulf states are the revisionist powers in this case, trying to tip the balance of power even further against Iran by toppling Tehran's one long-standing ally in the region.

From this perspective, the conflict between Iran and its rivals is less a product of Iran's expansionist goals as it is a classic security dilemma, exacerbated perhaps by ideological differences that render both sides more suspicious of the other's intentions. If this is the case, then a U.S. policy that seeks to simultaneously reassure Washington's allies in the region while also providing the Iranian regime with guarantees that its interests in the region would be respected could lay the groundwork for a less confrontational relationship.

Figure 4. Determining an Iran Strategy to Achieve U.S. Objectives.



U.S. Strategic Options

Based on U.S. strategic objectives vis-à-vis Iran, there are three basic policy approaches available to the United States for dealing with Iran's regional aggression and stemming its momentum: rollback, containment, and modus vivendi.

The task force believes that for the United States to protect its enduring interests in the Middle East and to secure the overarching strategic objective of "sustainable order" in the region, it needs a comprehensive strategy for countering Iran's destabilizing role in the region. While we are not making a specific recommendation among the strategies presented here, we strongly believe that one of them, or a combination of several of them, must be enacted. The United States has options to choose from in confronting Iran's regional influence, but ignoring Iran is not one of them.

The United States has options to choose from in confronting Iran's regional influence, but ignoring Iran is not one of them.

There should be an overall, coherent policy, however, and that direction, we believe, should be captured by one of the three options outlined below. The choice among these different strategies should be determined by policymakers' judgment, informed by intelligence assessments, on two key questions relating to Iran's capabilities, vulnerabilities, and intentions. For the most part, these options are presented in an order that indicates increasing levels of confrontation with Iran; the stronger or more hegemonic Iran is judged to be, the stronger the response that will be needed.

Rollback

The most aggressive option, rollback would be designed to keep regime/Iranian forces away from the borders of Turkey, Israel, and Jordan—all U.S. allies. This would involve renewed pressure on Iran's presence in Syria by U.S.-supported proxies and would direct U.S. military action where necessary. Rollback would also involve a concerted push to check Iranian military power in Iraq through support of the KRG, Iraqi Sunnis, and anti-Iranian Shiite actors. Finally, it would involve heightened efforts to weaken Iran at home and in the region, raising costs in Yemen, for example, while weakening the regime's capacity for power projection by exploiting its growing domestic vulnerabilities. Finally, it would involve highlighting the regime's domestic vulnerabilities in order to undermine its capacity for regional power projection and show solidarity with Iranians seeking democratic change.

Assumptions

Pursuit of a rollback strategy would be informed by a judgment that the position of dominance that Iran has already achieved poses a significant threat to U.S. regional interests and the security of U.S. partners. With a land bridge through Syria and Iraq, Iran could more easily proliferate advanced weapons to its militia and terrorist allies. Iranian rule of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis could spark renewed radicalization and the rise of ISIS's successor. Moreover, it would effectively border two key U.S. allies, Israel and Jordan, in addition to encircling Saudi Arabia. Finally, all of these developments could give Iran the capability to launch a devastating attack against Israel, a capability that could serve as a deterrent against either Israel or the United States taking action should Iran ever restart its nuclear program.

Additional assumptions underlying this strategy pertain to the capability of the United States to actually push back against Iranian forces and proxies in the region. It is almost certainly necessary to treat Syria and Iraq as a single battlefield for the purpose of this strategy, with U.S. action against Iran in any one of these countries putting U.S. forces and assets in the others in danger of Iranian reprisals. Further assumptions pertain to the ability to hold territory taken back from Iranian control, as well as the costs, both financial and political, of doing so. They will certainly be high, but undertaking a rollback strategy assumes that they are bearable or, at the very least, proportionate to the threat they are meant to avert.

This strategy also entails an assumption about the strength of Russian-Iranian ties, namely that, with the right combination of inducements and threats from Washington, they are not so strong as to prompt Russia to risk conflict with the United States on Iran's behalf. In particular, the crucial assumption here is that Russian interests in Syria are based solely on maintaining access to key naval and air bases in the northwest and might

extend to keeping Assad in power but that those interests do not extend to the southern and eastern territories where Iran's presence poses the greatest threat to U.S. interests and allies. The direct military confrontation that will be necessary to roll back Iranian control of Syria can only be successful if it does not escalate into a conflict with Russia.

Accompanying Policies

Syria

A rollback strategy would begin with a renewed U.S. commitment to using the SDF in Der ez-Zor and rebel groups in Tanf in order to aggressively deny Iran control over Syrian territory bordering U.S. allies, limit the regime's access to oil revenue, cut off its access to the Iraqi border, and target any offensive capacity it seeks to develop against U.S. allies. This would be accompanied by support for non-al-Qaeda-linked rebel forces on the Turkish border as well as Israeli efforts to keep Iranian forces away from the Golan Heights. To achieve U.S. objectives, this strategy would not require ousting Assad.

A starting point for a rollback strategy would be an Authorization for Use of Military Force explicitly transforming the U.S. mission in northern Syria from counter-ISIS to counter-Iran. It would also require a workable approach for coordinating U.S. policy in northeastern Syria with Turkey and preventing conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish People's Protection Units. These two elements would then facilitate the use of U.S. assets in and near Syria for the aggressive campaign described above. This would be accompanied by other forms of pressure—for example, interdicting Iranian shipments of money, weapons, and other supplies to the regime—as well as denying it access to reconstruction funds. Expansive missile strikes in response to further use of chemical weapons could also serve to impose significant costs on the regime. Finally, all of these policies would be bolstered by firm support for Israel if a confrontation erupts with Hezbollah in its stronghold in southern Lebanon, as seems increasingly likely.

Iraq

A rollback strategy would also involve robust support for U.S. partners in Iraq, specifically maintaining a military presence in the country to exert pressure on the government after Iraq's May elections. Washington's decision to stand by while PMF units seized the city of Kirkuk after the Kurdish independence referendum was at least in part predicated on the assumption that this was necessary to help secure Abadi's victory in May. Rollback, by contrast, would be based on the assumption moving forward that for Abadi to stand up to Iranian influence and bring the PMF under Baghdad's control requires increased pressure rather than support. Rollback would involve maintaining a significant troop presence in Iraq in order to (a) back the KRG in future negotiations with Baghdad and ensure its financial independence through direct oil sales to the outside world; and (b) provide Iraqi Sunnis security guarantees against the PMF to encourage them to turn away from insurgency and rebuild and develop electoral alliances with other anti-Iranian actors in Parliament. Beyond this, continued political and economic engagement within the KRG will be needed to prevent the fractures between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan from deepening to Iran's advantage. Washington should also support Saudi efforts to increase their influence in Iraq and work with Shiite actors who are trying to chart an independent path from Tehran.

Regionally

Beyond Iraq and Syria, a rollback strategy would seek to intensify pressure on Tehran at home and in the region in order to reduce its ability and willingness to challenge U.S. interests in the region. This could involve interdicting by sea and air Iranian arms shipments that are going not only Syria and Lebanon, but to Yemen as well. Washington would also prioritize resolving the Yemeni civil war in a manner compatible with Saudi interests. This need not mean open-ended support for the Saudi war effort, but it would entail devoting increased diplomatic and military resources to the conflict with an eye toward negotiating a Saudi withdrawal on acceptable terms.

This approach would also exploit Iran's internal vulnerabilities. In the realm of public diplomacy, this would entail drawing attention to the regime's corruption and publicizing the resources it devotes to overseas conflicts. Given the role that concerns over these issues reportedly played in the most recent wave of anti-regime protests, emphasizing these themes would complement efforts to directly increase the costs of Iran's foreign involvement in Syria. Military pressure abroad would be complemented by diplomatic or even economic pressure directed against the regime at home with a recognition that intensified domestic resistance would limit Iran's ability to project power in the region. Ultimately, a strategy of rollback could heighten the contradictions of the Iranian system, leading the Iranian public to enact political change as they have several times in the past, dating back to 1906 and the Constitutional Revolution against the Qajar Dynasty.

Analysis

Two successive presidents have promised the American people that they could secure U.S. interests in the Middle East while expending less blood and treasure to do so. To suddenly reverse that position would likely incur congressional and popular opposition. If the United States were to undertake such deployments despite this challenge, it would confront considerable and obvious risks. The most immediate would come from directly confronting an adversary that has terrorist and other proxy forces throughout the region that could target U.S. troops, assets, and partners. It is highly unlikely that Iran would confine itself to the Euphrates Valley theater of operations in retaliating against the United States. Thus, force protection would be absolutely critical, particularly in Iraq, where Iran has already proved its penchant and ability for targeting American troops. Navy vessels in the Gulf and Red Sea could also find themselves in danger. And the threat of missile attacks against Israel would also be real.

But perhaps the even graver danger would be the risk of conflict with Russia. While Iranian and Russian objectives in Syria do not completely overlap, Russia has been providing air support for Iran's campaign in eastern Syria. In order for the United States to confront Iran in Syria without having the conflict escalate and spread to include Russia, it would need to establish an understanding with Moscow in which each power recognizes the other's sphere of influence in Syria, beyond the current division that has Russia in the northwest and the United States in the northeast.

If the United States could compel the Iranian forces pushing into eastern Syria and western Iraq to retreat, it would find itself holding predominantly Sunni territory. Too hasty a departure would only invite Iran's return, but a prolonged presence of American troops is not feasible, either. Nor could the United States turn solely to its primary partners, the Kurds, to govern these areas indefinitely. Thus, U.S. forces would be forced quickly to find and vet Sunni Arab partners, at the least to beef up the Arab component of the SDF. Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states with connections to local tribes could help.

Washington would also have to maintain its alliance with the SDF and find means to square this with its relationship with Turkey. In the long run, to impede Assad's ability to consolidate power, U.S. diplomacy might need to advocate for policies that produce a fractionated Syria, such as a confederation, thus denying Iran access to at least some parts of Syria. This, too, would probably require coordination with Moscow and Ankara.

Yet the risks of this policy have to be weighed against the risks of inaction. Specifically, the costs of the policy have to be weighed against the possibility of incurring greater costs in the future if Iran is not checked now. Rollback is not an approach to be chosen out of convenience but rather because policymakers decide that the circumstances, and fundamental U.S. interests, demand it.

Containment

Containment would involve defending U.S. gains in eastern Syria while imposing firm redlines to prevent Iran from using Syria as a base to launch attacks against America's allies. In Iraq, it would entail continued political support for the Abadi government as it tries to gain control over Shiite militias, coupled with a stepped-up effort to reconcile Baghdad and Erbil. In short, containment would enforce the regional status quo or a tolerable variant, not attempting to push Iran back from its regional gains but also not allowing it to make further gains beyond a line predetermined by American policymakers.

Assumptions

A containment strategy rests on a number of broad assumptions: (a) that Iran's current position in the region does not yet significantly threaten U.S. interests, but if allowed to persist over the long-term could do so; (b) that Iran has not overplayed its hand in the region and will continue to advance absent U.S. action; (c) that the United States—whether through military posturing, sanctions, or other means—can arrest Iran's momentum and perhaps press it into an eventual retreat without resorting to a direct confrontation; (d) that the United States can persuade its regional allies to accept the status quo so that they do not take matters into their own hands; and (e) that all this could be done with minimal expenditures and military deployments.

In other words, this approach is based on the notion that the United States can live with the current level of Iranian influence in the region and that the United States is able to deter Iran from eroding the predetermined status quo. In this light, a robust containment policy would pressure Iran to

stop its current aggression and then exert increasing political, economic, and military pressure in order to convince Iran to abandon its maximalist goals. The aim of this policy would be to arrest Iran's progress, to limit its incentive and ability to undermine regional regimes, and to assure U.S. regional allies that Washington shares their concern about Iranian aggression and is determined to halt it.

Accompanying Policies

Syria

Containment would involve a series of steps to prevent the emergence of a post-civil-war Syria under complete Iranian domination. This would require supporting Israel's efforts to prevent the manufacture of Hezbollah missiles on Syrian territory, as well as drawing redlines to prevent the deployment of Iranian forces directly on the Jordanian or Israeli borders. This would also require maintaining a U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria, in part to serve as a check on Iran's free movement of goods and individuals across the Syrian-Iraqi land corridor. A containment policy would also involve responding to the regime's potential use of chemical weapons, but would keep these efforts more limited and strictly retaliatory, rather than trying to expand them into a source of pressure on the regime.

A U.S. containment policy of weakening Iranian influence would be diplomatically focused, particularly in the context of negotiating the contours of a post-civil-war regime but also in negotiating "de-confliction zones." Regarding de-confliction zones, the United States should seek to limit the presence of pro-Iranian forces. This would mean remaining engaged with and bolstering local Kurdish and Sunni Arab forces on both sides of the Syrian/Iraqi border as well as backing some form of autonomy for Syrian-Kurdish-inhabited areas.

Iraq

In Iraq, containment would require a broader and more aggressive political strategy aimed at pressing Abadi to display his independence from Iran. This would involve the full incorporation of the PMF into the Iraqi military and their detachment from Iranian influence. In both the Shia- and non-Shia-dominated portions of the country, the best avenue for countering Iranian influence is through support for the ISF. The goal of supporting and bolstering the ISF is to enhance its ability to provide internal stability and also specifically to control forces that are more loyal to Tehran than to Baghdad. In the aftermath of ISIS's defeat, however, it is not clear that U.S. troops will be able to remain, even though Prime Minister Abadi has indicated he would like them to do so. Pro-Iranian and other Iraqi Shiite forces are already demanding their removal; a representative of Muqtada al-Sadr has called for "resistance" against American troops.[75] If an agreement on an ongoing U.S. troop presence must be approved by the Iraqi parliament, it is unclear what the verdict would be.

As a result, a containment strategy would put the burden on Abadi's political acumen, focusing on giving him financial and diplomatic support on the assumption that he would use this to try to resist Iranian domination of the ISF. Finally, in light of the September 25 Kurdish independence referendum and subsequent conflict, another key to the containment approach would be rebuilding a relationship between Erbil and Baghdad. The United States would seek to avoid a complete capitulation on Erbil's part, but would not necessarily have to be an exclusive advocate for the Kurds. The dominant assumption of U.S. mediation would be that any solution that rebuilt relations between the two sides would ultimately minimize the long-term prospects for Iranian interference.

Regionally

Beyond Iraq and Syria, containment would involve working to resolve the conflict in Yemen and facilitate Saudi withdrawal, accepting continued Houthi control in Sana'a but preventing the importation, deployment, or use of missiles that threaten Saudi territory. In this approach, Washington would not focus on exploiting the regime's domestic weaknesses, but it would be prepared to do so as an escalatory measure. Similarly, in Syria, imposing costs on the regime to weaken its standing at home would remain a policy response if Iran crossed any of the aforementioned redlines.

Analysis

Iran's determination, resources, local connections, and proximity will pose obvious challenges to a containment strategy. Once the acceptable status quo is determined, actually holding it—that is, preventing Iran from spreading its influence, including through proxies—would be difficult.[76] The chaos of Iraq and Syria could provide cover for a multitude of Iranian gains, while the use of proxies provides Iran with a measure of deniability.

Thus, careful determination of publicly declared redlines would be critical. Redlines bring clarity, but they also carry risks: Once declared, they must be enforced, which can limit diplomatic flexibility; if unenforced, the perception of unreliability or weakness can corrode foreign policy well beyond the immediate theater. And enforcement can be difficult when redlines are trimmed in gray. For example, will the United States distinguish between the IRGC and other pro-Iranian forces? How, for example, will the United States, in fact, define pro-Iranian forces, particularly in Iraq, where U.S. forces have praised some of the PMF for their anti-ISIS efforts?

If they choose the containment approach, U.S. decision-makers must decide the contours of Iranian influence they are willing to accept. If the goal is to secure only vital U.S. interests, and to do so with minimal expenditure of blood and treasure, the U.S. position cannot be too ambitious. But to the extent that the goal is also to assure U.S. regional allies that the United States will not allow further erosion in their position vis-à-vis Iran, the position also cannot be too modest.

Modus Vivendi

Modus vivendi would be a form of tense coexistence based on translating U.S. military leverage in Syria and elsewhere into a diplomatic outcome that involves an uneasy balance among Iran and its rivals across the region. Ultimately, this approach would be predicated on the idea that with the right mix of pressure and incentives, Iran would accept a limited but recognized role in the region compatible with the interests of the United States and its allies. This policy would entail U.S. encouragement of a status quo based on regional spheres of influence that are mutually recognized and accepted by Iran and Saudi Arabia, negotiated or otherwise—perhaps along the lines of President Barack Obama's prescription that the two parties "need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."[77] This variant would require Iran to curb its regional ambitions significantly and require Saudi Arabia to accept a level of Iranian regional involvement it currently finds intolerable.

Assumptions

This approach rests on the assumption that Iran is not ideologically driven to seek the overthrow of Sunni Arab regimes or the destruction of Israel but does expand its influence when it senses an opportunity. Thus, by strengthening regional Gulf states and perhaps increasing its own regional presence, the U.S. balance-of-power strategy would seek to demonstrate to Iran that it has nothing to gain from further regional aggression and should cease those activities that U.S. regional allies find threatening. This would also increase Sunni Arab confidence in the United States as a backer.

Accompanying Policies

Pursuing a strategy of modus vivendi would require a successfully calibrated multi-front military and diplomatic effort. The United States would have to demonstrate its capacity to impose costs on Iran while simultaneously coordinating with U.S. allies to develop an indigenous consensus on what degree of Iranian regional influence they would be willing to accept. At the same time, however, diplomatic engagement with Iran would be required to gauge Iran's receptivity toward a mutually tolerable regional arrangement. Eventually, if such an arrangement could be reached, this policy would have Washington foreswear its efforts to impose costs on Iran in return for Iran abandoning its regional aggression.

Syria

The most pressing space for implementing this policy would be in Syria. Creating a modus vivendi would involve accepting Assad's continued rule as a fait accompli but using U.S. leverage in Syria and in the region to push for a negotiated but lasting solution to the country's conflict. A realistic peace deal would almost certainly involve the parts of the country currently held by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces accepting something beyond nominal regime control of their territory. It would also require allowing the regime to take back a significant portion of the Idlib Province, with some smaller regions in the northwest remaining under the control of Turkish-backed rebels. Development aid and international acceptance of the Assad regime would have to be made dependent on Tehran's acceptance of the new status quo in Syria and throughout the region.

Iraq

In Iraq, a modus vivendi strategy would similarly require recognizing that Iran will continue to have a significant military and political role in the country. Yet it would also require Iran to recognize that it cannot hope to dominate the country as it does in Lebanon and Syria. In order to secure

the support of America's Gulf partners for this strategy, they would also have to be encouraged to engage with Iraq, taking advantage of economic opportunities there both as a counterbalance to Iran and as an incentive to seek a less confrontational relationship.

Regionally

Ultimately, the success or failure of this strategy will be determined outside the borders of Syria and Iraq. Syria might actually prove one of the easier pieces to solve. But for Saudi Arabia to find a balance of power credible, the Iranian-backed Houthi movement in Yemen would also have to be checked—that is, pushed back to its northern Yemeni redoubt—or, at the very least, Iran would have to cease to be a factor there, so that it would also cease to be a threat on Saudi Arabia's southern flank.

The key factor differentiating the pursuit of a modus vivendi from other approaches would be the diplomatic framework accompanying Washington's policies in the region. Many of the concrete steps initially taken in Iraq and Syria under this approach might resemble those of containment, or even rollback. Yet, from the outset, Washington would emphasize that it was willing to accept Iranian influence in the region and emphatically reject the pursuit of regime change. Toward this end, Washington would also begin the process of consulting with its regional allies to develop and articulate the parameters of a workable regional balance of power. For this policy to function, it could not be seen as something the United States sought to impose on its allies; instead, it would have to reflect a consensus among them. Facilitating this would require careful and patient diplomacy from the outset and a steady stream of reassurances at the same time Washington also sought to engage Tehran.

Analysis

To be effective and durable, an Iranian-Saudi modus vivendi would require that Saudi Arabia be confident that Iran had ceased using proxies and other methods of internal subversion in neighboring states—a difficult standard to meet. It is very unlikely Saudi Arabia would consider Iranian influence in Yemen excised without the defeat of the Houthis, whether Iran were actively involved or not. If the Houthis are defeated, the psychological environment for establishing a more stable relationship between Iran and the Gulf could be present. Otherwise, Gulf Arabs would likely continue to feel threatened and a modus vivendi would remain unworkable.

Tehran would also have to be confident that its core interests were not threatened and that Washington had truly abandoned all efforts to isolate Iran and pursue regime change. If Iran decided that the role allotted to it in a proposed balance was incompatible with what it believed its self-defense or ideological imperatives required, Washington would have to revert to a strategy of containment. Similarly, if Tehran decided that the United States or its regional partners were not sincere in their willingness to accept a fixed Iranian role in the region, it would continue to push against them in ways that would make a modus vivendi impossible. Thus this approach would have to be preceded by a candid assessment on Washington's part of what it could accept and what its partners would accept, followed by a willingness to take potentially controversial actions to telegraph this acceptance. A negotiated settlement in Syria that acknowledged the continued rule of the Assad regime—which Iran regards as the preservation of the regional status quo ante—would likely serve as a crucial first step in this regard.

Currently, the regional balance appears to be tilting toward Iran. The ending of the conventional-arms-import ban on Iran in three years could allow Iran to begin to develop the ability to project power across the Gulf. Even now, the Arabs have no real answer for Iranian missiles or the IRGC navy, which can inflict damage on Gulf oil installations and threaten the Straits of Hormuz. Thus, Gulf Arabs will likely have to rely increasingly on U.S. weapons support, military presence, and declared backing simply in order to deter Iran and maintain the current balance.

The challenge in pursuing a modus vivendi would be for Washington to provide enough support to its allies to allay these concerns without convincing Iranian policymakers that their worst fears about U.S. intentions had been realized. However, if this approach worked, in the long run it would represent the ideal strategy for stabilizing the region at a minimal cost to Washington. After an initial expenditure of resources, the United States would be able to increasingly delegate regional security to its allies in the absence of persistent Iranian aggression. More importantly, winding down the proxy wars in the region, as well as a geopolitical rivalry that has driven increased sectarianism over the past decade, would undermine one of the leading causes of jihadi radicalization in the region.

Conclusion

This task force believes that Iranian momentum in the Middle East is real, threatening to U.S. interests, and perceived as dangerous by regional U.S. allies. The task force further believes that the United States must take the lead in addressing this challenge and that doing so will require a far more comprehensive policy than Washington heretofore has pursued, as it has focused, understandably, on reining in Iran's nuclear program and defeating ISIS. The three policy options above offer varying approaches to this problem—some more aggressive, some less so—but all converge on the need for U.S. leadership and long-term engagement in the task of thwarting Iran's assault on the region.

The task force is refraining from recommending one policy approach over another, and its members have divergent views as to which is the advisable course. As noted, a blend of these approaches, applied differently on different fronts, may provide the best overall results. Certain elements, however, will be common to all of these approaches.

The most important of these commonalities is continued U.S. engagement in eastern Syria and political engagement in Iraq in the aftermath of ISIS's defeat. Eastern Syria and western Iraq, both Sunni-dominated, have no apparent heir to power in ISIS's wake. Were the United States to pull up stakes and leave, it seems likely that one of two unwelcome outcomes would result: Either pro-Iranian forces (including, possibly, the Assad regime) or jihadi forces would take charge. If the former, Iran might be able to complete the Tehran-to-Beirut corridor it seeks, which would facilitate its resupply of its most important regional ally, Hezbollah; fortify its role in Syria and on Israel's border; and extend its regional dominance. If the latter, the United States would be back to square-one, with no choice but to return to the region to dismantle another center of jihadi terrorism.

Continued U.S. engagement in Syria will be necessary both to dismantle remaining terror networks and help create sociopolitical conditions that will break the vicious cycle of radicalization. Moreover, Syria also occupies a vital strategic position from the U.S. perspective: It borders four major U.S. partners. Following the 2003 Iraq conflict, Syria's role in funneling Sunni jihadis into Iraq proved how detrimental an inimical Damascus regime could be to Iraqi stability and U.S. interests. More recently, the Syrian conflict has spilled over into Turkey, contributing to instability in a NATO ally, while also creating a refugee crisis that has spread into Europe. And if Iran is allowed to solidify its grasp over Syria, it will be able to project its power right up to the borders of Israel and Jordan, threatening both, even more than it already does, with rockets, missiles, and militias.

Continued U.S. engagement in Syria will be necessary both to dismantle remaining terror networks and help create sociopolitical conditions that will break the vicious cycle of radicalization.

Finally, the outcome of the Syrian conflict has a symbolic significance for the region. It is in Syria that the optimism of the Arab Spring gave way to the brutal and bloody reality of unyielding dictatorship. It is in Syria that Iran has invested tremendous blood and treasure to preserve its client, overwhelming the patchwork of regionally supported opposition forces. Unless it is part of a broader settlement in which Tehran accepts other limitations on its powers, regime victory in Syria will burnish Iranian prestige and fuel Arab anxieties.

To forestall such an outcome, the United States will have to maintain, and potentially expand, its military presence for the purpose of training, equipping, and assisting indigenous forces until there is an acceptable political settlement. Indeed, the goal of U.S. military policy in Syria should be threefold: First, building the SDF into what they claim to be—a genuinely national force. Second, improving the capabilities of U.S.-backed forces to make them, essentially, a persistent thorn in the side of the Assad regime and the Iranians, preventing them from forcibly uniting the country on their own terms. Third, punishing the Assad regime for its use of chemical weapons, while recognizing that this in itself will not amount to a comprehensive policy or a means of solving the wider Syrian conflict.

Iraq, a critical gateway to the Gulf, Jordan, and Syria—and the possessor of the world's fifth-largest pool of proven oil reserves—is probably not strong enough to resist Iranian dominance without the presence of the United States as a balancing force in Baghdad. The end of the U.S. occupation in 2011 marked the onset of a vast expansion of Iranian influence, which had already been considerable even prior to the U.S. departure. Now that ISIS has brought the United States back to Iraq, it is in Washington's interest to maintain a low-level presence, if possible.

Given its Shia majority but sizable Sunni minority, it is critical for the region and for Iraqi stability that Iraq not be simply an Iranian satellite. Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, have begun to open up to Iraq. They would not do so if they believed it would end up under Iranian domination. With its presence in Iraq, the United States could help the Baghdad government—assuming it is so inclined, as the current one under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi seems to be—stem the tide of Iranian influence and, through continued U.S. assistance, reinforce the national, as opposed to sectarian, nature of the army and prevent dominance by pro-Iranian Shiite militias. In such circumstances, it would be far more difficult for Iran to use Iraq as a launching pad for extending its influence further into the Arab world, whether into Syria or into Kuwait.

As noted, however, the Iraqi parliament would have to support or at least not object to the U.S. presence, and that remains to be seen. The U.S. departure in 2011 was hastened by the Iraqi parliament's refusal to accept a continued U.S. role. In the wake of America's anti-ISIS efforts, things might be different this time, but, as noted, powerful Shiite interests, both pro-Iranian and nationalist, are seeking to secure America's departure once again.

The most pivotal region in which United States policy toward Iran will play out is the Syria-Iraq nexus. A comprehensive policy for sustained and effective engagement in both countries is now necessary to stabilize the region in the face of Iranian disruption.

Endnotes

1 *The Economist*. "Donald Trump intends to take on Iran. Right, but Risky." February 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21717384-how-far-new-administration-prepared-go-donald-trump-intends-take.

2 Alex Shashkevich. "US Wants Peace, Stability in Syria, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says in policy speech at Stanford." Stanford University. January 18, 2018. Available at: https://news.stanford.edu/2018/01/18/secretary-state-rex-tillerson-discusses-u-s-strategy-syria-stanford/.

3 Eric Cortellessa. "In Mike Pompeo, Trump taps an Iran hawk whose views dovetail with his own." *The Times of Israel*. March 13, 2018. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-mike-pompeo-trump-taps-an-iran-hawk-whose-views-dovetail-with-his-own/.

4 Dehlia Nehme and Roberta Rampton. "Trump Says 'Big Price to Pay' for Syria Chemical Attack." *Reuters*. April 7, 2018. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-attack/trump-says-big-price-to-pay-for-syria-chemical-attack-idUSKBN1HE0RR.

5 *BBC*. "Syria Air Strikes: US and allies attack 'chemical weapons' facilities." April 14, 2018. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43762251.

6 Julie H. Davis. "Trump drops push for immediate withdrawal of troops from Syria." *The New York Times*. April 4, 2018. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/trump-syria-troops.html.

7 Eric Cortellessa. "In Mike Pompeo, Trump taps an Iran hawk whose views dovetail with his own." *The Times of Israel*. March 13, 2018. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-mike-pompeo-trump-taps-an-iran-hawk-whose-views-dovetail-with-his-own/.

8 Dehlia Nehme and Roberta Rampton. "Trump Says 'Big Price to Pay' for Syria Chemical Attack." *Reuters*. April 7, 2018. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-attack/trump-says-big-price-to-pay-for-syria-chemical-attack-idUSKBN1HE0RR.

9 Bipartisan Policy Center. *Seeking Sustainability at Sustainable Cost*. Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East. April 2017: 4. Available at: https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Seeking-Stability-at-Sustainable-Cost.pdf.

10 Tyler Nottberg. "Solarium for Today." Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College. Available at: http://www.eisenhowerinstitute.org/about/living_history/solarium_for_today.dot.

11 Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman. *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 123-146.

12 Ibid, 257.

13 Bipartisan Policy Center. Seeking Sustainability at Sustainable Cost. Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East. April 2017: 4. Available at: https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Seeking-Stability-at-Sustainable-Cost.pdf.

14 At the end of its existence, the Soviet Union was an exception to this rule, fortunately.

15 Parisa Hafezi and Lesley Wroughton. "Normal ties unlikely despite Iran nuclear deal." *Reuters*. October 1, 2015. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-iran-usa-insight/normal-ties-between-iran-and-u-s-unlikely-despite-nuclear-deal-idUSKCN0RV4CT20151001.

16 F. Gregory Gause. "Why the Iran Deal Scares Saudi Arabia." *The New Yorker*. November 26, 2013. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-the-iran-deal-scares-saudi-arabia.

17 BBC. "Houthis reportedly gain control of most of Sanaa." December 4, 2017. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/saleh-fate-unknown-house-bombed-houthis-171204095843076.html.

18 Adam Coogle. "Saudi Arabia's 'War on Terror' is now targeting Saudi Shiites." *Foreign Policy*. August 23, 2017. Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/23/saudi-arabias-war-on-terror-is-now-targeting-saudi-shia/.

19 *Defence Web*. "US Arms Exports grow significantly with Asia and the Middle East leading arms importers: SIPRI." March 26, 2018. Available at: http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51179:us-arms-exports-grow-significantly-with-asia-and-the-middle-east-leading-arms-importers--sipri&catid=7:Industry&Itemid=116.

20 Barak Ravid. "Netanyahu: Israel Opposes Cease-Fire Deal Reached by US and Russia in Southern Syria." *Haaretz*. July 16, 2017. Available at: https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israeli-official-syria-cease-fire-reached-by-u-s-russia-very-bad-deal-1.5494539.

21 Ben Hubbard. "Iran out to remake Mideast with Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah." *The New York Times*. August 27, 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/27/world/middleeast/hezbollah-iran-syria-israel-lebanon.html.

22 Gili Cohen. "Israeli Army Intelligence Chief: Hezbollah Is Setting Up a Weapons Industry in Lebanon With Iranian Know-how." *Haaretz*. June 23, 2017. Available at: https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.797428.

23 Dion Nissenbaum and Rory Jones. "Israel Conferred with U.S. on Strike in Syria to Target Iranian War Gear." *The Wall Street Journal*. April 17, 2018. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-conferred-with-u-s-on-strike-in-syria-to-target-iranian-war-gear-1524001066.

24 *Al-Jazeera*. "Israel confirms bombing 'Syria Nuclear Reactor' in 2007." March 21, 2018. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/israel-confirms-bombing-syria-nuclear-reactor-2007-180321073115879.html.

25 Saeed Jalilli. "Iran's currency crisis hits Rouhani's middle-class base." *Al Monitor*. February 26, 2018. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/iran-rial-currency-crisis-rouhani-voter-base-middle-class.html.

26 Ray Takeyh. "Iran's Regime Probably Won't Die Quietly." *The Wall Street Journa*l. January 16, 2018. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-regime-probably-wont-die-quietly-1516145522.

27 Ladan Boroumand. "Iran's 2017 Election: Waning Democratic Hopes." *Journal of Democracy* 28(4).

28 Nazila Fathi and Robert Worth. "Protests flare in Tehran as Opposition disputes vote." *The New York Times*. June 13, 2009. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html.

29 Joshua Davidovich, "Iranians target Tehran's support for Palestinians amid massive protests." *Times of Israel*, December 31, 2017. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranians-target-tehrans-support-for-palestinians-amid-massive-protests/.

30 *Today Online*. "Price Protests in Iran turn political as rallies spread." December 29, 2017. Available at: https://www.todayonline.com/world/iran-cleric-urges-tough-action-after-price-protests-turn-political.

31 Jamie Dettmer. "Did Iran's Hardliners Orchestrate Start of Iranian Protests?" *VOA News*. January 5, 2018. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-hardliners-role-iranian-protests/4192703.html.

32 Saeed Dehghan. "Rouhani acknowledges Iranian discontent as protests continue." *The Guardian*. December 31, 2017. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/31/protesters-who-spread-fear-and-violence-will-be-confronted-says-iran.

33 CIA. "The World Factbook." Available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html.

34 Abbas Djavadi. "Iran's Ethnic Azeris and the Language Question." *Radio Free Europe*. July 19, 2010. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/Irans_Ethnic_Azeris_And_The_Language_Question/2103609.html

35 Nader Entessar. "The Kurdish Factor in Iran-Iraq relations." Middle East Institute. January 29, 2009. Available at: http://www.mei.edu/content/kurdish-factor-iran-iraq-relations.

36 Bethan McKernan. "Kurdish Referendum: Iran closes border with Iraqi Kurdistan over independence vote fears." *The Independent*. September 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdish-referendum-iran-close-iraq-border-kurdistand-independence-vote-polls-ballot-a7965481.html.

37 The World Bank. "Country Overview: The Islamic Republic of Iran." Available at: http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview.

38 Iran's PCI is roughly $5,300—as a point of comparison, about half of Turkey's.

39 Thomas Erdbrink. "Steep Slide in Currency Threatens Iran's Economy." *The New York Times*. April 11, 2018. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/world/middleeast/currency-iran-economy.html.

40 Nicky Woolf. "US navy shows off ship-based laser weapon in Persian Gulf." *The Guardian*. December 10, 2014. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/10/us-navy-test-laser-weapon-persian-gulf.

41 Colonel Sean J. Corrigan. "Exploitable Vulnerabilities of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." *United States Army War College*. 2011. 7-8.

42 Maggie O'Kane and Angus Stickler. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards point to fresh dissent within oppressive regime." *The Guardian*. June 11, 2010. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/11/iran-election-revolutionary-guard.

43 Jack Watling. "The Shia Militias of Iraq." *The Atlantic*. December 22, 2016. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/shia-militias-iraq-isis/510938/.

44 *Fox News*. "Military Assessment says Iraqi military units infiltrated by ISIS and Iran-backed militiamen, report claims." July 24, 2014. Available at: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/07/14/military-assessment-says-iraqi-military-units-infiltrated-by-isis-iran-backed.html.

45 Ibid.

46 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. "Iran's Influence in Iraq." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. April 2011. Available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus111.pdf.

47 Bilal Wahab. "Iran's Warming Relations with the PKK Could Destabilize the KRG." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. February 6, 2017. Available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-warming-relations-with-the-pkk-could-destabilize-the-krg.

48 Tim Arango. "Ian Dominates in Iraq After U.S. 'Handed the Country Over.'" *The New York Times*. July 15, 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html.

49 Tony Duheaume. "Analysis: Tracing Iranian Quds Force links to illegal drugs trade." *Al-Arabiya*. June 2, 2017. Available at: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2017/06/02/ANALYSIS-Tracing-Iranian-Qods-Force-links-to-illegal-drugs-trade.html

50 Ibid.

51 Erin Cunningham. "Islamic State threatens more bloodshed in Iran." *The Washington Post*. August 15, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-was-at-the-forefront-of-the-fight-against-isis-now-it-has-to-face-the-militants-at-home/2017/08/14/e4fb735a-7dfe-11e7-b2b1-aeba62854dfa_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d96907f7a6ee.

52 *Reuters*. "Hezbollah seizes much of Islamic State enclave on Syrian-Lebanese border: Nasrallah." August 24, 2017. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-hezbollah

53 Julian Borger. "US shoots down second Iran-made armed drone over Syria in 12 days." *The Guardian*. June 20, 2017. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/20/us-iran-drone-shot-down-syria.

54 Ahmad Majidyar. "Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq: We'll form next Iraqi government and expel US Forces." Middle East Institute. February 27, 2018. Available at: http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-backed-asaib-ahl-al-haq-we-ll-form-next-iraqi-government-and-will-expel-us-forces.

55 Ali Alfoneh. "Transnational Shiite Clergy's challenge to the Islamic Republic." Middle East Institute. March 16, 2018. Available at: http://www.mei.edu/content/io/transnational-shiite-clergy-challenge-islamic-republic.

56 *Al-Jazeera*. "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr makes rare Saudi visit." July 31, 2017. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/iraq-muqtada-al-sadr-rare-saudi-visit-170731073908238.html.

57 *BBC*. "Kirkuk: Iraqi forces seize oilfields near city." October 17, 2017. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41649729.

58 Council on Foreign Relations. "Syria, Iran and the Mideast Conflict." July 18, 2006. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/syria-iran-and-mideast-conflict.

59 Mohamad Bazzi. "The Growing U.S.-Iran Proxy Fight in Syria." *The Atlantic*. June 20, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/iran-syria-trump-saudi-arabia-escalation-isis/530844/.

60 Ibid.

61 Bozorgmehr Sharafedin. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria." *Reuters*. January 19, 2017. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-revolutionary-guards-reaps-economic-rewards-in-syria-idUSKBN1531T0.

62 Ibid.

63 *BBC News*. "Syria Conflict: US jet 'downs Iranian made drone.'" June 20, 2017. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40344534.

64 Artemis Moshtaghian. "Iran launches missiles into eastern Syria, targets ISIS." *CNN*. June 19, 2017. Available at: http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/18/middleeast/iran-launches-missiles-into-syria/index.

65 Jonathan Paris. "Are Israel and Iran stuck on a collision course?" *The Cipher Brief*. March 25, 2018. Available at: https://www.thecipherbrief.com/israel-iran-stuck-collision-course.

66 Alessandria Masi. "Why Syria and the US clashed for control east of the Euphrates." *Souciant*. February 19, 2018. Available at: http://souciant.com/2018/02/why-syria-and-the-us-clashed-for-control-east-of-the-euphrates/.

67 Ben Hubbard, Isabel Kershner, and Anne Barnard. "Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, Expands 'Axis of Resistance.'" *The New York Times*. February 19, 2018. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html.

68 Itamar Eichner. "INSS Report Details Threat of Two-Pronged 'First Northern War.'" *Ynetnews*. January 2, 2018. Available at: https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5064799,00.html.

69 In some cases, the difference focuses on the narrow issue of the land corridor itself—and whether or not Iran would be able to dominate the entire area surrounding the corridor. In Israel and elsewhere in the region, there is a concern that Iran would use a land corridor as an arms-supply route, a more convenient addition to its air and sea routes. Skeptics, however, dismiss Iran's ability to achieve and hold such a corridor through mainly Sunni-populated territory.

70 Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. "Iranian Strategy in Syria." Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project. May 2013. Available at: http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf.

71 Jeff Schogol. "15 Years after the US overthrew Saddam Hussein, Iraq still at war with itself." *Task and Purpose*. March 19, 2018. Available at: https://taskandpurpose.com/iraq-to-the-future/.

72 Article 154 says that, "while it [Iran] completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world." In this case, "other nations" seems to refer to non-Muslim nations.

73 Gregg Carlstrom. "The Qatar Crisis is Pushing Hamas Back to Iran." *The Atlantic*. June 14, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/qatar-crisis-saudi-arabia-hamas-iran-syria-gcc-gaza/530229/.

74 The International Crisis Group. "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East." Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east.

75 Mustafa Saadoun. "Will US keep military bases in Iraq after IS?" *Al-Monitor*. March 31, 2017. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2017/03/iraq-usa-security-mosul-iran-military-base.html.
Hamdi Malik, "Iraqi factions divided over whether US troops stay." *Al-Monitor*. May 17, 2017. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/us-troops-iraq-mosul-isis-iran-shiite-militias.html.

76 *Foreign Affairs* estimates that Iran has some 150,000 to 200,000 non-Iranian Shiite proxies at its disposal.

77 Susan Harvey. "Saudi Arabia, Iran Must Shape 'Cold Peace,' Obama Says." *Reuters*. March 10, 2016. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-obama-idUSKCN0WC23A.

Notes

BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

The Bipartisan Policy Center is a non-profit organization that combines the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. BPC drives principled and politically viable policy solutions through the power of rigorous analysis, painstaking negotiation, and aggressive advocacy.

bipartisanpolicy.org | 202-204-2400
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, D.C. 20005

@BPC_Bipartisan
facebook.com/BipartisanPolicyCenter
instagram.com/BPC_Bipartisan

BPC POLICY AREAS

Economy

Education

Energy

Evidence

Finance

Governance

Health

Housing

Immigration

Infrastructure

National Security

BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, D.C. 20005
202-204-2400 | bipartisanpolicy.org