

Post -Treaty Iran: Green Light or Containment?

Remarks by David Schenker at La Maison du Futur 2017 Annual conference: “The Limits of Ambitions-External Interventions and State System in the Arab Middle East: Challenges, Alignments, Expectations,” Bikfaya, Lebanon.

Months into the Trump Administration, still little is known about the trajectory of US foreign policy. To be sure, during his inaugural address, President Trump laid out a vision of “America First” that appeared to promise a more transactional basis for bilateral relations with US allies. The President has also clearly articulated a priority of defeating the Islamic State. Yet the Administration has been less forthcoming about its approach to Iran.

Prior to coming to office, candidate Trump famously pledged to abrogate the nuclear deal with Iran, which he described as “the worst deal ever negotiated.” Since taking office, this position has seemed to soften. Indeed, in March President Trump spoke about “greater strictness” in enforcing the nuclear deal and has since reinforced this policy in meetings with Saudi officials, where he stressed evaluation and strict enforcement of the nuclear deal.

Likewise, early on, the president’s first National Security Advisor, Mike Flynn, put Iran “on notice” for its’ regionally destabilizing behavior, including new ballistic missile testing in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions. This statement, however, was apparently not coordinated throughout the government, spokesmen declined to explain the comment, and weeks later, Flynn was fired.

Still, in March, Vice President Pence repeated this very same formulation at a conference in Washington of the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). During his speech, VP Pence described the Administration as having “put Iran on notice,” and pledged that the Administration would not tolerate Iranian efforts to “destabilize the region and jeopardize Israel’s security.”

Beyond Israel’s security, the Trump administration is concerned with Iranian efforts to destabilize Saudi Arabia, and in particular Tehran’s pernicious involvement in Yemen. According to the United Nations, Iranian military support for the Houthis dates to at least 2009. On March 21, the US government imposed sanctions on eleven entities and individuals involved in sensitive trade with Iran’s missile program, with the intent of cutting off Iranian missile support to the Houthis.

A well-known Washington aphorism is that “policy is people.” Two months after taking office, however, the Trump Administration has yet to appoint, publicly designate, or put before the Senate for confirmation hundreds of its leading officials. Without these Deputy Secretaries, UnderSecretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense, State, and Treasury, it will be difficult to craft and implement any coherent strategy departure from the Obama Administration-era policy.

During the Obama Administration, by signing the nuclear deal, Tehran essentially purchased immunity for all of its regionally destabilizing activities. It has widely been thought—in part based on the tough minded confirmation testimony of Secretary of Defense Mattis—that during the Trump Administration, Washington would take an increasingly robust response to Iranian provocations. Indeed, many, especially Republicans, hope that the Administration will seek to roll back some of the regional gains Tehran made over the past 8 years.

These hopes were buoyed early on when the Administration announced new sanctions against Iran, targeting people and businesses supporting the missile program and the IRGC-Quds Force. More recently, in April 2017, the

Administration sent a signal of sorts to Tehran, when it fired 60 cruise missiles at a Syrian airforce base believed to have been the origin of a chemical weapons attack against civilians. While this was not a warning to Iran *per se*, it did announce clearly the Administration's willingness to use force to advance US interests—in this case, to preserve an international norm prohibiting the use of these non-conventional weapons.

Trump's statement on Iran indeed leaves the door open for various forms of action. In February the president stated that "We're not going to stop until that problem [Iran] is properly solved. And it's not properly solved now." But much more will have to be done and the Administration will have to lay out a coherent policy employing both diplomatic and kinetic tools if Washington intends to not only contain, but to reverse Iran's march through the Sunni Muslim world. It will be difficult to craft a policy to achieve this end, but early signs are that this is at least an objective on the Administration's radar screen.

Understanding of the Problem

While a Trump Doctrine regarding Iran's regionally destabilizing behavior has yet to emerge, there are some positive signs that senior Administration officials and top military leaders articulate a different understanding of the nature of the problem than the previous administration. The most prominent example of this is CENTCOM commander Gen. Joseph Votel, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee in early March that Iran posed the greatest long-term threat to stability of the Middle East. During testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on March 29, Gen Votel offered his policy prescription for how to deal with Iran:

We need to look at opportunities where we can disrupt [Iran] through military means or other means their activities... We need to look at opportunities where we can expose and hold them accountable for the things that they are doing.

The Administration's reaffirmation of the US commitment to Iraq and Saudi Arabia further signals a break with Obama's policy. In Vice President Pence's February 2017 meeting with Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq, he stressed that the US would not allow Iran to threaten Iraq nor the region as whole. President Trump relayed the same message during a phone call with Prime Minister Abadi. Similarly, Trump discussed the importance of confronting Iran's destabilizing activities his White House meeting with Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia.

The Administration appears to want to get tougher with Iran. At the same time, however, the Administration is prioritizing trade and American jobs. On Iran, these policy positions have created a bit of an anomaly. For even as the Administration is talking tough on Iran, it is promoting billions of dollars of trade for American companies with Iran—including the sale of products that had previously been prohibited by sanctions. The biggest deal to date is Boeing's \$3.4 billion deal to sell Iran's Aseman Airlines—the third largest commercial airlines in the state—30 737 MAX jets. Delivery is slated to begin in 2022.

Depending how the Administration prioritizes the sale of these airplanes, for example, trade could restrain policy options for Washington in dealing with other, problematic behavior. Yemen: In part due to threats in Bab al Mandab, the Trump Administration is stepping up its involvement in Yemen. Just recently, Secretary of Defense Mattis asked the White House to lift a number of Obama-era restrictions in order to grant the Department of Defense greater freedom to act in Yemen. His statement called for limited support for Gulf State intervention against Iranian-backed Houthis, seemingly in preparation for an Emirati-led offensive to re-take the Red Sea port of Hodeida. Approval of Mattis's request would suggest more robust US involvement in counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda in

Yemen and in pushing back against Iran's Houthi proxies. The challenge there is balancing the campaign against Iranian proxies and not exacerbating the horrific humanitarian situation.

Still other questions remain how the US will counter Iranian influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and elsewhere. For example:

Syria: The Trump Administration is narrowly focused on defeating IS. This principal objective suggests the US will de-conflict if not work with the Russians in Syria to this end. The Administration is at best ambivalent about the Assad regime. Will it be possible to strike a deal with the Russians that downgrades the presence of Iran and its foreign legions in Syria? This is the position of Turkey. There have been unverified reports that the Administration's strategy is to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran in Syria. It's far from certain that this goal, while admirable, is achievable.

Iraq: After Mosul, what will happen to Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq? Will the US again withdraw, and allow the Abadi Government to resume its anti-Sunni sectarian policies that helped nurture IS? Will Washington stand idly by as Iran completes the Lebanonization of Iraq, complete with its own militias that permanently operate outside the control of Baghdad? US security assistance to Baghdad will be difficult to maintain if Tehran remains the dominant political force in the capital, and if Iranian Revolutionary Guards continue to operate without constraint in Iraq.

Lebanon: Aside from the funding of the LAF and supporting the election of any president, the Obama Administration had no policy for Lebanon. This disinterest in Lebanese politics—along with Riyadh's frustration—led to Washington's ceding of Lebanon to Hezbollah and Iran. Is it too late to reverse Iran's latest gains in Lebanon? What can the Trump Administration do to reengage in the struggle for this symbolically if not strategically important state? Will the US Congress intervene if President Aoun continues his gratuitously obsequious pro-Hezbollah pro-Iran rhetoric?

The list goes on, and this doesn't even begin to address the military component of countering problematic Iranian behavior in the Gulf, where dangerous incidents and close calls have increasingly been occurring between US and Iranian vessels in international waters.

In March, for example, it was reported that an Iranian Navy frigate came within 150 yards of a US Naval Intelligence ship south of the Strait of Hormuz. The incident, which US officials described as "unprofessional" raises tensions in the region, and the chances for military contact. The harassment of the George H.W. Bush US Aircraft Carrier later that month while it was traversing the straits was even more dangerous. Iranian fast attack boats came within 950 yards of the carrier, prompting US helicopters to hover over the Iranian fastboats.

Based on statements from military leaders, it appears that in the coming months, US naval vessels in particular, will be more aggressive in defending themselves from Iranian aggression in the Gulf. If this occurs, it will create a new dynamic between Washington and Tehran, moving US policy toward containment, if not confrontation with Iran.

All told, then, it appears that the Trump Administration is starting to chart a new course toward Iran. It is too early to predict how this policy will look, but the broad contours of the approach appear to be taking shape. Judging from the preliminary response from Washington's traditional allies, so far at least, the Administration is doing something right.