

Trump is Right About Iran, Yet Wrong

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ALAM SALEH, JUL 25 2019

President Donald Trump is correct in expressing that Iran's growing power is concerning.[1] He is also right that the administration of President George Bush has worsened the power and stability of Iran, not least because of its strategically disabling mistake of invading Iraq, which resulted in power vacuum that enabled and empowered Iran since 2003. Trump is quite right in positing that Obama's nuclear deal with Iran has strengthened Iran and entrenched its political stance.[2] These factors are undermining Trump's anti-Iranian policies in contemporary foreign relations, and the double-faceted strengthening of Iranian influence challenges Trump's attempt to demonise Iran and thereby justify US military action against the Islamic Republic. Today Trump is left with few options on the table except for the further imposition of economic sanctions designed to confront Iran's growing power in the region. These sanctions are arguably important constraints on Iran but are simply insufficient to compel Tehran to reverse its increasing desire for influence in regional politics.

The 2003 Iraq War was followed by the Arab Spring in 2010; these events both dramatically altered the balance of power in the region and revitalised sectarianized power politics in the Middle East long before the inauguration of Trump in January 2017.

The growth of Iran's power, driven by the emergence of pro-Iranian militarily armed non-state actors and Sunni political revivalism and insurgency in Iraq, has radically shifted power relations and the security architecture of the region. This situation is hugely exacerbated by the Syrian crises and conflicts. A new sectarianised power politics, arising from these changes in the region's balance of power, at both state and societal levels, has coincided with intensifying rivalries between regional powers and extra-regional international actors, sparking a relative frenzy of hard and soft power postures and actions. To serve their respective political interests, this fractured and heterogeneous mix of regional actors has driven the increasing intensification of a complex matrix of radical politicisation, tense securitisation and armed mobilisation across the Middle East. As such, growing sectarian divisions in the region have enabled regional powers to enact double proxy wars in the region to advance their political goals, exploiting and benefitting from the myriad intersections between sectarian ideas, ethno-nationalisms, and religious or secular agendas.

The new transnational security complex in the region has thus prompted Iran to transfer its strategic focus away from Iran-as-nation-state and towards extra-territorial relationship building. Iran has been increasingly bolstering its power and influence by placing less focus on the state's power and instead creating and supporting sectarian armed groups across the Middle East that share and serve Iranian security agendas and national interests. All the non-state actors, organisations, leaders and ideologues, which Iran has actively empowered, share a common framework that asserts their various identities and defines their enemies. Iran-sponsored sectarian groups outside of the Republic, range from Shi'a insurgents to Sunni minority groups to ethnic-interest militias, but they share a common *referent object*: the belief that their sectarian identities are existentially threatened. Iran has fuelled the mobilisation of sectarian identity to defend itself. Tehran has successfully securitised Shi'a identity, reifying a representation of the Shi'a as a fundamental risk, and has thus managed to create and mobilise strong and numerous Shi'a militias in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and elsewhere within and beyond the region.

Nevertheless, it was the Arab Spring and the events that followed it that fragmented and significantly changed the region's geo-political structures. The emergence of *weak states* and *strong societies* has further deteriorated the

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balance and sustenance of effective relations between non-state actors and the long-established, conventional Middle East security constructs. The hitherto rigid power relations characterising the Middle East encountered tangible threats which problematised the continuance of regional stability built on those power relations. Non-state actors became ever more empowered by this broadly speaking region-wide erosion of the nation-states, and the many already existing militarised radical groups across the region found themselves perfectly positioned to capitalise on this crisis in state powers. Most of these armed groups are considered, by their adversaries, as terrorist groups. This makes it all the more difficult for the Trump administration to negotiate with or accommodate these actors in any foreign policy developments without further disturbing the very fragile balances and a perplexing assortment of alliances in the region today.

Amidst this emerging security complex, characterised by diminishing state intervention and coupled with the growth in sectarian non-state modes of gaining and executing power, Iran has been strategically shrewd. Iran has exploited this feature of the new Middle Eastern regional security architecture, deploying its relations with non-state armed sectarian groups to strengthen its position. The new dimension has seen Iran introducing a new state-led foreign policy approach distinctly at odds with its former, conventionally statist approach. It is empowering non-state armed political groups via funding, intelligence aid, arms provisions and ideological support.[3] Iran thereby employs these groups to serve its interests by exploiting the weakness of vulnerable states and by creating parallel national armies across the region. The United States' (US), historically dependent on autocratic, powerful authoritarian leaders to affect sufficient stability in the Middle East, is now struggling to comprehend this fragmented and decentralised power dynamic in the region. The US simply lacks the necessary experience in non-state centric power struggles to be able to approach this new Middle East security complex with strategic clarity.

These structural changes in the region's security dynamics have created a political opportunity for Iran to challenge Washington despite its inferior military capability. Tapping into and exacerbating the ideological conflicts and gaps caused by the demise of Arab nationalism and the securitisation of Islamism. Tehran has generated a Shi'a-identified network to fill gaps and redress schisms in ideology by creating or further empowering parallel sectarian armed groups in the region, namely: the Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq; the Fatemiyoun Division / Zainabiyoun Brigade in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen .[4] These newly created or recently re-empowered Shi'a militias have increased Iran's power and influence in the region through a shared Shi'a politics. Trump is therefore correct to state that he has inherited a mishandled Middle East from Bush's historic mistake in invading Iraq, which has led to Iran's increased power in the region.

Trump is also right that the 2015 nuclear deal between the Obama administration and Iran has bolstered Iran's economic power and has brought Iran back into the international community, ending its isolation with little strategic reciprocation in return.[5] This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the *status quo ante*. Although Trump was able to unilaterally withdraw from the deal, he could not effectively isolate Iran and was unable to convince the international community to place greater pressure on Iran. Widened military action is now clearly off the table. Hence, Obama made it difficult for Trump to have any options except for the initiation of unilateral economic sanctions. Additionally, Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal has seemingly isolated Washington politically rather than sequester Iran from international community.

However, Trump is wrong in arguing that he has a list of options to confront Iran in addition to economic sanctioning. As the Trump administration knows, and of course the four-star generals in Washington know very well, the US cannot enter a long, asymmetrically fought and open-ended war. Washington might be able to start a war, but it will be Tehran that decides when it ends. Iran's geographical, natural and demographic particularities make it extremely difficult for Trump to decisively win a war or to achieve important military objectives should he decide to invade Iran. Washington has failed to do so in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq. Bear in mind that the US and NATO were to defeat the Taliban after 2001 entirely, they have effectively handed Iraq to the Iranians since 2003, and they have been domestically constrained in trying to topple Syria's Assad regime since 2011.

Notwithstanding its inferiority to the US in military and economic terms, Iran has deterrent powers and postures that can restrain Washington's military aggression and hostile diplomacy. Should Washington launch a war on Iran, substantive actions will be limited to airstrikes targeting military and nuclear sites. Such limitations do not apply to

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Iran, however. Tehran, increasingly facing a perceived existential threat, will exact all necessary measures to survive such a war.

Iran may adopt three core strategies to deter a Washington invasion, whether limited or large in scale: prolongation; diversification; and expansion of the dimensions of war. Iran's ability to prolong the war, disrupt the use of the Strait of Hormuz, and mobilise its Shi'a allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. may well compensate for its relative military and economic weaknesses. By adopting extensive and intensive forms of asymmetrical warfare across several US military bases and disrupting and blocking several seemingly unrelated American interests in the region, Tehran may find itself more capable than a cursory glance at military capabilities would suggest.

To prolong the war remains the core priority in this scenario, and Tehran's leadership will thereby seek to unite the people internally, rally around the flag and its deep-running sentiments, and to defer from using all its power(s) promptly and combined so as to aggravate the US' ability to withstand a long and frustrating war. Democracies, and the US in particular, cannot afford to engage in a long term, open-ended wars. The military options open to the US are limited and lack assurance of effectiveness insofar as serving US interests is concerned. The strategies discussed above, when deployed by Iran, would lead to the prolongation of the war, which Washington cannot afford and which the wider international society would struggle to accept.

Iran would diversify the methods it employs in such a war. While the US would likely comply with international law and war regulations, it would lack options beyond military airstrikes, which would be limited in their targeting to military and/or nuclear sites only. This mode of warfare is rarely effective or consequential in the long term. When it comes to the expanding the war, Washington would be limited to engaging in military action in only a very small part of Iran. Iran, however, would be able to strategically use the power and disruptive forces of Shi'a Militia from the Oman Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, and the Red Sea and in the Strait of Mandab. Those who posit that Trump ultimately seeks to provoke a war with Iran should consider that there have been four sudden attacks on foreign ships in the Oman Gulf, in addition to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's shooting down of a US drone, and yet Washington has been reluctant to respond aggressively and notably reserved in its diplomatic involvement. Trump knows very well that a war affront on Iran is not possible, and Tehran knows that such a war is impossible. Trump, regardless of US military and economic might, is in the weaker of the two positions because of the quagmire of factors discussed here.

Trump also lacks adequate international support to launch a war against Iran, and he struggles to gain credibility in other states' eyes. Public opinion trends and oil price fluctuations are two critical factors explaining why Trump will struggle to enter an inevitably prolonged war in the already very fragile Middle East. Trump is therefore wrong that his so-called 'maximum economic pressure' will lead to Tehran's surrender. No country in the region, nor any outside it, has ever surrendered to external forces for purely economic considerations. This will not change in the case of modern day Iran. The demographically and industrially indiscriminate economic war measures set against Iran could further demonise Trump in the Iranian consciousness, ever wary of Westernised and secular political views. The blanket sanctions, invariably affecting all sectors of the Iranian economy and all strata of Iranian society, run the serious risk of legitimising Tehran's anti-American rhetoric and enabling Tehran to further exacerbate and mobilise nationalist sentiments (as happened during the Iran-Iraq war).

Bush's 2003 Iraq war and Obama's 2015 nuclear deal have, in hindsight, strengthened Iran's regional and international position. They have made it deeply problematic for Trump to confront Iran by any means but economic sanctions. This policy will not lead to Tehran's surrender and will at the least buttress its identity as a forceful anti-US presence in the international community. Today, the United States lacks the perceived legitimacy and credibility to enter a prolonged war with Iran. Iran's ability to mobilise loyal Shi'a militias, coupled with its existing conventional military capabilities, are sufficient to deter the Trump administration from declaring war on Iran. Trump's determination to avoid embroiling America in further conflicts in the Middle East, a core component of his electoral manifesto, make the declaration of war even more implausible. The US's inability to successfully execute a well-orchestrated war effort, worsened by its crisis in international legitimacy and confounded by Trump's avid avoidance of involvement in any external region of the world, are all the result of Washington's past administrations' policies since 2003. Any war in the region will fail to effect an 'official end of Iran' and hard military action would comprise an

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irreversible mistake for Trump. Donald Trump, right or wrong, has no option in dealing with Iran but to deal with Iran.

Notes

[1] Hannah, J. (2019). Trump's Iran Policy Hasn't Failed—Yet. *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/14/george-bush-and-international-relations-a-world-in-motion-after-the-berlin-wall/> [Accessed 24 July 2019].

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[3] Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East. International Crisis Group. (2018). Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east> [Accessed 24 July 2019].

[4] Nakhleh, E. (2019). The Islamic Revolution's Impact On Political Islam And The Middle East. *Lobe Log*. Available at: <https://lobelog.com/the-islamic-revolutions-impact-on-political-islam-and-the-middle-east/> [Accessed 24 July 2019].

[5] Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report. International Crisis Group. (2018). Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/173-implementing-iran-nuclear-deal-status-report> [Accessed 24 July 2019].

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