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When Proxies Fail, Force Must Prevail: US-Iran Relations

| Jonathan Ruhe



For decades, the United States and Iran have pursued fundamentally incompatible strategic objectives. Yet despite having expansive goals and minimal mutual interests, each side has recognized that direct confrontation would jeopardize its ultimate goal. Thus competition between the two countries often has taken less decisive, but also less risky, forms of behavior, namely: diplomacy, sanctions, and the use of proxy forces. Given the stakes involved, however, relying entirely on such measures to convey the seriousness of one's intentions is insufficient. Indeed, the United States has been most successful influencing Iranian policy when it has demonstrated its own willingness to use force or supported actors using military force directly against Iran – and

conversely, least successful when it has failed to do so.

The two countries have long held mutually exclusive aims. The United States wants to remain predominant in the Middle East to ensure the free flow of natural resources and the security of its allies, even as it withdraws troops after more than a decade of war and faces an uncertain fiscal future. The Iranian regime pursues nuclear weapons capability to protect against its perceived danger from a US-supported overthrow, provide an umbrella under which it can project unmatched power against its neighbors, and validate its continuing right to rule, among other goals. Both objectives are highly ambitious and in direct conflict with each other.

Therefore the lethargy of peace suits both rivals well, as neither side feels it can afford an overt rupture. For the United States, direct conflict would critically endanger its efforts to maintain

"The contrast between the successes and failures of US policy toward Iran underscores the central importance of credible threats of force in pursuing diplomatic objectives against an adversary with minimal mutual interests."

regional stability with a receding regional footprint. For Iran, it would seriously delay its approach to a nuclear weapons capability. There is little middle ground for diplomacy to secure, given the two countries' ultimately irreconcilable goals.

These opposing policies have resulted in numberless rounds of negotiations with little effect on Iran's nuclear program. The lack of any real advance on this front is not surprising, given the lack of shared interests beyond avoiding direct conflict. In such circumstances, the in-

direct use of violence shapes incentives at the negotiating table in ways negotiators by themselves rarely can, because it sends a message about the seriousness of either side's intentions without necessarily committing either side to the head-on collision neither desires.

More specifically, the application of force by proxy—and at times the failure to apply such force—has concretely affected each side's decision-making at key instances throughout their rivalry. The United States has successfully underscored the seriousness of its intentions through a perceived readiness to use force, or through enabling those willing to use force, directly against Iran. Conversely, the United States has undermined its credibility when it shies away from such opportunities – most recently in events surrounding Syria during the lead-up to the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) in late 2013—or when it fails to respond effectively to Iran's use of similar measures. Because the stakes at the heart of this rivalry are so high, less direct forms of competition—for example, when each side's proxy forces engage the other's—have proportionally less effect on US or Iranian decision-making.

This pattern was first evident in Iran's agreement to the 1988 ceasefire with Iraq which ended a profoundly bitter and seemingly interminable war. After turning back Saddam Hussein's initial invasion by 1982, Iran's leaders decided to push the war into Iraq to break

their country's perceived encirclement by hostile powers wishing to strangle their revolution. Iran's surge threatened Western-allied oil-producing monarchies along the Persian Gulf, prompting a gradual but steady escalation of US support for Iran's foes. Throughout this process, the U.N. Security Council adopted a series of unanimous resolutions calling on both sides to halt hostilities and return to the international border—in effect demanding Iran abandon its war aims and withdraw from Iraq.

Such diplomatic efforts accomplished little by themselves, given the regime's conviction that it could secure the revolution only by expanding it. From 1984 the war broadened as both sides prosecuted it with deepening brutality, to include massive Iranian ground offensives against Iraq, strategic bombing and missile strikes on population centers by both sides, chemical weapons use, and, with the greatest threat to US interests, attacks on Gulf oil shipping. Ultimately, Iran accepted the U.N. resolutions, but only once the United States abandoned its indirect support to Tehran and swung its weight fully behind Iraq and the Persian Gulf monarchies after 1986. This vital material and intelligence support was evident in the massive Iraqi offensives which threatened to collapse the entire Iranian front in the summer of 1988 – something Iraq patently failed to do since its initial invasion in 1980. Combined with a very brief but highly damaging naval en-

counter with US forces that same year, Tehran became convinced that continued belligerence would imperil the Islamic Republic itself.

Iran executed a similarly momentous about-face in late 2003, when it agreed to verifiably suspend key aspects of its uranium enrichment program. This occurred in the wake of US military campaigns that collapsed two neighboring regimes in less than two years. Saddam Hussein and the Afghan Taliban had long stymied Iran, but the demonstrable ease with which the United States deposed the regimes gave pause to leaders in Tehran. In Iraq, the United States and its allies had accomplished in three weeks what Iran could not do in six years, which pressured Iran to come to the negotiating table.

Prior to this, diplomatic engagement by Britain, France and Germany had failed to make Iran conform to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) demands that it halt enrichment and open its facilities to requisite inspections. Once Iran perceived its rival was both highly willing and able to resort to force, however, it could not assume the United States would tolerate further foot-dragging. As the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear program concluded, "Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressure..." which, in the absence of any meaningful sanctions enforcement at the time,



left only the credible threat of military action. Indeed, Iran's leaders viewed the United States' actions as indicating that Washington was willing to inflict significant punishment for continued intransigence. Rather than risk potential confrontation, they acquiesced in many of their opponents' demands. Iran voluntarily suspended enrichment in October 2003, and one year later signed an agreement creating a framework for IAEA verification of this suspension.

This success was only temporary, however. Over the next several years, the United States proved unwilling to devise an effective strategy or devote the necessary resources for stabilizing Afghanistan and eradicating the Taliban. At the same time, it greatly struggled to confront a much larger and more costly

insurgency in Iraq – one in which Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) coordinated, funded, trained and supplied Iraqi Shiite militias' deadly attacks on coalition forces, according to leaked US military documents.¹ Over this period the IRGC provided similar types of support, though on a smaller scale, to the Taliban as it fought to reestablish itself in Afghanistan, according to the US State Department.²

By 2006 the US position in Iraq reached its nadir. In April of that year, Iran announced it would resume uranium enrichment, and soon thereafter began

1 Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *New York Times*, October 22, 2010

2 US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism: Iran," August 18, 2011.

expanding its overall nuclear program. While Iran continued developing the program overtly and covertly for the next seven years, the two sides muddled through several rounds of talks, only to have Iran balk repeatedly at any offer that might substantively limit its progress. This pattern developed because both sides wanted to avoid the collapse of talks: the United States, because it was already committed to two other wars in the region; Iran, because negotiations bought time to continue advancing toward nuclear weapons capability, and because it could continue attacking US forces by proxy.

This pattern has held since 2006, despite the proliferation of other US-Iran proxy conflicts across the Middle East. In each of these cases, both sides avoided involvement that would be direct, unequivocal, and/or large enough to trigger a major shift at the nuclear negotiating table. Tehran and Washington provided military support to Hizballah and Israel, respectively, in the 2006 Lebanon War, though neither committed itself overtly to the fighting, let alone in a manner that could help produce a decisive outcome. Both sides trod even more lightly in Bahrain. Tehran has not demonstrably supported the Shia-majority populace's uprising on any level approaching its involvement in Iraq, while Washington acted likewise toward its Gulf Cooperation Council allies, which tried to suppress the uprising. Until the crisis in 2013 over the Assad regime's use of

chemical weapons, Syria's civil war reinforced this trend. Iran's heavy backing for the Assad regime was the worst-kept secret in the region, but nevertheless it avoided the palpable displays of material aid coming from Syria's other allies, primarily Russia. On the other side, the United States had never clearly decided which proxy forces—if any—to support, let alone how strongly to do so.

Thus Iran's policy of avoiding direct conflict with the United States has persisted as the country approaches the precipice of nuclear weapons capability. Simultaneously, it perceives the diminishing likelihood of direct conflict – a perception underscored by a slew of statements from US officials steadily undermining the credibility of the commitment to keep all options on the table for preventing a nuclear Iran. In 2010-2012 then Secretaries of Defense Gates and Panetta, and chairmen of the Joint Chiefs, Mullen and Dempsey, variously emphasized the “unintended consequences,” “unpredictability and uncertainty” of military action which would not be “prudent.” Unlike 1987-8 or 2001-3, when US actions forced Iran to decisively adjust its strategy to the United States' advantage, US policy has had largely the opposite effect since Tehran restarted its nuclear program in 2006.

Paradoxically, sanctions have helped tilt Tehran's calculations toward pursuing its nuclear program. Though intended to help reignite diplomatic

efforts, the United States' exclusive reliance on such measures—and concomitant downplaying of the viability of the military option—actually underscored American policymakers' reticence to seriously consider more forceful alternatives for inducing Iran to negotiate in earnest. Furthermore, Washington's insistence that such “crippling” and “unprecedented” sanctions would soon bring Iran to the table has been belied by its hesitance to enforce them. Other than binding multilateral U.N. sanctions against Iran's weapons programs, the Bush Administration enacted no unilateral measures once Iran restarted enrichment, and it failed to enforce Clinton-era sanctions on foreign companies investing in Iran's energy sector. The Obama Administration has signed an unprecedented number and range of sanction bills into law, but has relied heavily on waiver authorities to minimize the cost of enforcement. This has been especially true of measures relating to Iran's oil export revenues, which form the lifeblood of the government budget and its nuclear program.

Beyond sanctions, the Bush Administration's reluctance to seriously contemplate a preventive strike on Syria's nuclear reactor in 2007 was an early indicator of shifting US policy on the use of force. Even though Syria's nuclear program was a smaller target than its Iranian counterpart and Assad's regime was Iran's closest Arab ally, the United States ultimately demurred. In this sense, Syr-

ia's significance in US-Iran negotiations has only increased with the spread of its civil war and President Obama's statement in 2012 that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”³ The US aversion to conflict, should Iran cross the nuclear weapons threshold, was manifested when it failed to uphold its own red line on Syria in 2013—a red line which would have been easier to sustain than the current one against Iran. In the cases of both Iran and Syria, US policymakers said the red line would be upheld by military action. In Syria, such action would be retaliatory or at worst preemptive, if regime forces were unequivocally preparing chemical weapons for an actual attack. The United States' threat credibility was severely undermined as Syria's possession, and ultimate use, of WMD was verifiable before concrete US military preparations could even have been undertaken to enforce the red line. In Iran, the red line for military action would be preventive, likely making the use of force more difficult to justify.

The US-Iran Joint Plan of Action must be understood in this context. The deal was agreed largely through US-Iranian negotiations. These occurred amid the immediate backdrop of events in Syria, with scant input from US diplomatic partners

3 White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012.

in Europe and Israel. With little to fear from the United States should diplomacy fail, Iran aggressively pursued its agenda. Under the interim deal, it retains the capacity to enrich sufficient fissile material for a nuclear device, without having to resolve its outstanding violations of international law. Additionally, a final deal would endorse Iran's longstanding demands for indigenous enrichment—and for international acknowledgment of its self-proclaimed “right” to do so—thereby ultimately removing any long-term diplomatic impediment to a normalized Iranian nuclear program.

The contrast between the successes and failures of US policy toward Iran underscores the central importance of credible threats of force in pursuing diplomatic objectives against an adversary with minimal mutual interests. In situations of acute competition such as that between the United States and Iran, negotiated compromise has always been preferable to direct conflict. As the historical record suggests, the best opportunity for the United States to secure its interests through diplomacy is to make abundantly clear that it is simultaneously in Iran's self-interest to do the same. Such statecraft has notably been deficient as Iran approaches nuclear weapons capability. To rectify this imbalance, the United States should reinforce its negotiations with Iran for a comprehensive long-term settlement over the latter's nuclear program with clear preparations to implement less

diplomatic inducements: supporting sanctions which would enter into force if the JPA expires without an acceptable final agreement; bolstering US declaratory policy to emphasize the viability of US and allied military options; and prepositioning assets in-theater to bolster US readiness for a potential military strike, should all else fail. 🇺🇸

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